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ABSTRACT

This guide lays out a detailed six-step strategy for promoting father involvement, especially among low-income, unwed men. Each of the six steps includes a menu of policy options from which policymakers can choose. Each step also includes detailed examples of what states, communities, and nonprofits nationwide are doing to promote responsible fatherhood, along with contacts and resources for policymakers who want to learn more. The six steps are: (1) teach men to be good parents; (2) help fathers improve relationships with their children's mothers; (3) remove barriers to work for low-income fathers; (4) use federal funds to finance responsible fatherhood programs; (5) make the child support system work for families; and (6) campaign to reinforce the message that "fathers matter." Teaching young men to be responsible fathers involves teaching them to delay parenthood until they reach adulthood, are old enough to marry, and have the education and skills to support their children financially. It also means teaching all fathers, regardless of age, education, or income level, how to relate to their children in healthy and positive ways. (SLD)

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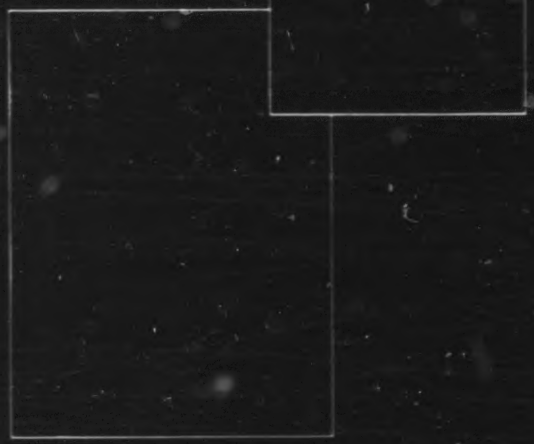
Restoring Fathers to Families and Communities

SIX STEPS for Policymakers



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Restoring Fathers to Families and Communities

SIX STEPS for Policymakers

Executive Summary

Across the country, states and communities are mobilizing to increase fathers' involvement in the lives of their children. The strategies they are choosing vary widely, reflecting the philosophical differences about the definition of "responsible fatherhood." Some efforts focus on teaching men the skills they need to be good fathers; others concentrate on child support enforcement; still others promote marriage and two-parent family formation.

But other states are still doing less than they could to promote father involvement. *Map and Track*, a 1999 survey of state responsible fatherhood efforts, reported that few states had begun new efforts to help fathers in the previous two years. One reason: There isn't enough specific information available for state and local officials about what they can do, legislatively or administratively, to help fathers help their children.

This guide tries to fill that gap. It lays out a detailed six-step strategy for promoting father involvement, especially among low-income, unwed men.

The guide will be most useful for state legislators, governors, and agency officials looking for ways to better serve fathers. But local government officials, businesses, community-based organizations, and the faith community will find ideas they can use as well.

Each of the six steps includes a menu of policy options from which policymakers can choose. Each step also includes detailed examples of what states, communities, and non-profits nationwide are doing to promote responsible fatherhood, along with contacts and resources for policymakers who want to learn more. The six steps are:

Step 1
Teach Men to be Good Parents

Children whose fathers are actively involved in their lives do better in school than children whose fathers aren't around. They are less prone to depression. They have better social skills. And they are more likely to become good parents themselves. If states want to ensure the best outcomes for their children, they will help men learn to be better fathers.

Teaching men about the responsibilities of fatherhood can't start too early. The Fatherhood Project of the Families and Work Institute emphasizes that preparation for parenthood should begin in boyhood, with programs that teach boys to behave responsibly, set high expectations, offer hope for the future, and ensure that all boys are connected to adult role models.

If these programs are effective, boys will learn the importance of good fathering—and take steps to ensure that they don't become fathers before they are ready. The Texas attorney general's office uses this approach with its PAPA program. Founded in 1995, PAPA's goal is to discourage teen pregnancy and reduce the need for future child support enforcement by teaching middle and high school students about the financial costs of raising a child. More than 30,000 students have participated in PAPA programs, and anecdotal evidence suggests the program has helped lower teen pregnancy rates.

States should look beyond prevention to helping men who are already fathers improve their parenting skills. Public support for programs such as the multi-city Boot Camp for New Dads can help new and expectant fathers learn about child development, supporting their babies' mothers, and caring for their infants.

Action Steps for State Officials:

❑ Revise sex education curricula to include components on fathering and the responsibilities of fatherhood.

❑ Require teens to study child health and child development in school.

❑ Organize and fund fatherhood education and support groups that are linked to programs serving new mothers, such as the federal Women, Infants, and Children nutrition program (WIC) and Healthy Start.

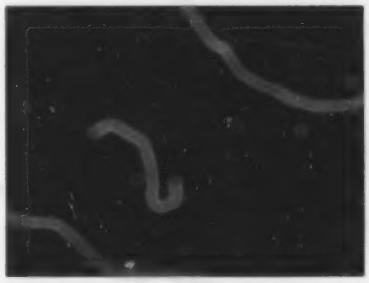
❑ Link paternity establishment programs to parenting programs for new fathers.

❑ Support programs that work with incarcerated fathers to help them learn to stay connected with their children while in prison and be better parents when they are released.

Step 2
Help Fathers Improve Relationships with their Children's Mothers

Children in single-parent families are more likely than children in two-parent families to grow up poor, fall behind in school, experience emotional problems, and end up in trouble with the law. By promoting marriage and two-parent family formation, states can save a fortune in social services and correctional expenses later on. That's why Tennessee granted the Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization $300,000 to send married couples to counsel low-income men and women about parenting, relationship, and employment issues in several tough Nashville neighborhoods.

Not all parents marry, or stay married. In cases where parents can't get along, states can first offer conflict resolution services to help parents resolve their differences; if those efforts fail, states can support efforts to help parents develop "co-parenting" skills. These efforts can help non-custodial, divorced, or never-married parents stay involved in their children's lives. The Parents' Fair Share program in Los Angeles, part of a state-funded demonstration project serving non-custodial fathers, has developed a special curriculum to help parents improve their communications and conflict resolution skills.



However, states also must recognize that some parents pose a danger to their children and partners. Any state-funded program that promotes marriage or co-parenting should have staff members who are knowledgeable about recognizing signs of physical and emotional abuse—and they should act quickly to protect children and others from danger.

Action Steps for State Officials:

❑ Encourage or require pre-marital counseling before couples can get marriage licenses.

❑ Fund organizations that focus on culturally sensitive relationship counseling and/or model marriage.

❑ Require fatherhood programs that receive state funds to train their staff members to spot domestic violence, report suspected abuse, and provide referrals to domestic violence services.

Step 3 Remove Barriers to Work for Low-income Fathers

One of the best ways to reduce childhood poverty and promote stable, healthy two-parent families is helping low-income men find work. Many fathers who don't pay child support are not "deadbeat." They are simply "dead-broke."

States should do more to help low-income men find steady, well-paid employment. Any father who needs it should be able to access job-search assistance, education and job training programs, and support in keeping his job. In Marion County, Illinois, for example, any parent with problems paying child support can find a job through the district attorney's Fathers That Work program, which has relationships with 29 area employers. In 1999 more than 1,700 people participated in Fathers That Work, and 64 percent of participants who got jobs through the program were still employed six months later.

States also need to address the tremendous barriers to employment that many men face. Low-income non-custodial fathers frequently struggle with low educational attainment, lack of work experience, and chronic unemployment.

Nearly 50 percent of low-income non-custodial fathers have criminal records. Many more have suspended driver's licenses or pending criminal charges stemming from failure to pay child support.

That's why the FATHER Project in Minneapolis, a joint venture of the state child support office, city employment and training agency, and area non-profits, offers clients a wide range of services. Men receive case management services, counseling, job training, placement assistance, retention services, and help in resolving child support-related legal problems.

Action Steps for State Officials:

❑ Link parenting programs for fathers to programs that focus on employment and training.

❑ Require state and local courts to refer men with child support arrearages to employment programs.

❑ Require child-support enforcement offices to pursue modification orders for low-income fathers who are trying in good faith to find and keep a job.

❑ Fund legal services for low-income men and women to help them overcome barriers to employment such as suspended driver's licenses.

Step 4 Use Federal Funds to Fund Fathers' Programs

Because of federal welfare reform, states have additional funding to serve fathers as well as mothers – and more flexibility in choosing how to spend it. They may use Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) block grant funds for any activity that meets the four broad purposes of welfare reform: ending welfare dependence, promoting employment, encouraging two-parent families, and reducing out-of-wedlock pregnancies.

Nearly $3 billion in TANF funds remain unspent; states can afford to devote some of this surplus to fathers. Many states are already doing so, but in most cases the efforts are minimal compared to the amount of funding available.

Other sources of federal funding exist as well: the Social Services Block Grant, child support enforcement funds, the Welfare-to-Work block grant (which Congress amended to make it easier for states to serve fathers) and a largely untapped resource, the Workforce Investment Act. In Long Beach, CA, for example, the Workforce Investment Board is using $150,000 in WIA funds to support the Responsible Teen Fathers Program, which helps young fathers overcome barriers to employment through intensive, one-on-one case management and weekly peer support groups.

Action Steps for State Officials:

❑ Set aside a percentage of TANF and Welfare-to-Work funds for programs serving low-income non-custodial parents.

❑ Apply to the U.S. Department of Labor to launch a non-custodial parents demonstration project under the Workforce Investment Act.

❑ Reserve any bonuses that the state receives under TANF or the Title IV-D federal child support enforcement program to serve non-custodial parents.

❑ Revise and simplify eligibility requirements for non-custodial parents to participate in TANF-funded programs.

Step 5 Make the Child Support System Work for Families

Most children need financial support from two parents, not just one. That is why Congress and the states stepped up child support efforts in the 1990s, streamlining collection procedures and instituting tough new penalties for parents who don't pay.

To some extent, these tougher laws are working. But the new laws have done little to address the complaints of many fathers that existing approaches to custody and visitation unfairly discriminate against dads. They also make life harder for parents who can't afford to pay.

The average low-income father has accumulated thousands of dollars in child support debt. Paradoxically, in many cases low-income fathers don't even owe this money to their families; they owe it to states as reimbursement for welfare payments to their children.

States can change the culture of the child support system from a punitive one to one that gives fathers positive incentives to support their children. States can enact more generous child support pass-throughs, which allow all child support collected to be paid to children. Wisconsin's policy is the most generous in the nation. The state passes through all money it collects to custodial families and disregards these collections when calculating a family's welfare eligibility.

States also can forgive or reduce the child support debt that low-income fathers owe to states. And states with Earned Income Tax Credits can revise policies to ensure that non-custodial parents receive some credit for the child support they pay if custodial parents don't qualify for the credit.

Finally, states can invest money in access and visitation programs that help fathers see their children. The more connected fathers are to their children, the more likely they are to pay child support.

Action Steps for State Officials:

❑ Reinstate state child support pass-throughs or strengthen existing pass-throughs to allow at least some of the child support paid by low-income fathers to be paid directly to their families.

❑ Forgive or decrease TANF-related child support debt owed to the state for fathers who participate in programs designed to increase their earnings and improve their parenting skills.

❑ Rewrite state child support guidelines to allow self-support reserves for non-custodial working parents.

❑ Amend state Earned Income Tax Credits to give fathers credit for the child support they pay.

❑ Suspend or forgive child support debt owed to the state when parents reunite or marry.

Step 6 Campaign to Reinforce the Message that "Fathers Matter"

Public awareness campaigns – reinforcing the message that children need their fathers for emotional as well as financial support – can play a major role in changing society's attitudes toward fatherhood. More importantly, these efforts can change the attitudes of fathers themselves.

National groups such as the National Fatherhood Initiative and the National Center for Fathering have been helping raise public awareness for years through media campaigns, essay contests, and grassroots organizing. Some states now have their own public awareness campaigns. The Virginia campaign, for example, was launched in collaboration with the National Fatherhood Initiative.

But states must do more. They must train agency employees to be sensitive to fatherhood issues, assess their own laws and policies for father-friendliness, and support community-based fatherhood programs. The Virginia Fatherhood Campaign and the Florida Commission on Responsible Fatherhood make seed grants to grassroots programs in their states. And in Wisconsin, the governor requires every state agency to audit its policies for father-friendliness.

Action Steps for State Officials:

❑ Create fatherhood commissions to advise the governor and legislature on how state agencies can better serve fathers and families.

❑ Initiate public awareness campaigns that promote responsible fatherhood.

❑ Develop father resource centers to serve as local clearinghouses for training and advice to fathers and social service agencies.

❑ Conduct agency audits for father-friendliness.

❑ Include a component on fathers in any diversity training that public employees are required to attend.

❑ Convene fatherhood hearings or town hall meetings and invite fathers, including low-income non-custodial fathers, to speak.

Restoring Fathers to Families and Communities

SIX STEPS for Policymakers

Introduction

For far too long, fathers have been the missing piece in the family policy agenda. Now that's starting to change. As communities struggle to remedy social problems from poverty to school failure to crime, they have discovered a single problem that plays a role in all of them– the physical or emotional absence of fathers in the lives of their children.

About 22 million children in this country live in single-parent homes.[1] These children are more likely than children in two-parent homes to experience poverty, to suffer from poor health, to fall behind in school, to have emotional and disciplinary problems, and to end up involved in the criminal justice system.

It's quite simple: Fathers matter. For children, two parents are better than one.

And not for financial support alone. As more mothers have moved into the work force and fewer fathers have faced the burden of being sole providers for their families, traditional roles have begun to shift and society has begun to realize the enormous non-financial contributions that fathers make to the lives of their children. They are nurturers, teachers, disciplinarians, role models, and pals. Fathers are not just a paycheck; they are dads.

As David Cohen notes in his introduction to the 1999 edition of *Map and Track*, published by the National Center for Children in Poverty, the nation witnessed two contradictory fatherhood trends in the 1990s. While many fathers were becoming more emotionally connected and actively involved in nurturing their children, another group of men simply walked away from their families – failing to provide even basic financial support.

A Burgeoning Fatherhood Field

A growing number of national fatherhood organizations, as well as hundreds of local efforts rooted in community and religious institutions, are working to encourage the first trend and to reverse the second. While their approaches vary, all of these efforts are critical for restoring fathers to their families and communities.

The National Fatherhood Initiative, for example, has launched a major public awareness campaign to educate the public and policymakers about the importance of fathers, while the Institute for Responsible Fatherhood's success in reconnecting alienated low-income fathers with their children has helped break down stereotypes. The Fatherhood Project of the Families & Work Institute is helping businesses adopt family-friendly policies that support fathers as well as mothers.

The National Center for Fathers and Families connects state policymakers with the latest in academic research about fathering, as well as insights from service organizations that work with fathers every day. The National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families helps the professionals who work with fathers do their jobs better. And the National Center for Fathering has fostered a grassroots movement of more than 170,000 fathers who are eager to learn how to be nurturers, teachers, role models, and mentors to their children.

But groups such as these can't do it alone. Policymakers – especially those at the state level – must take action to support and expand the efforts.

Why States Must Get Involved

Quite simply, fatherlessness costs states money. When fathers don't support their children financially or emotionally, government frequently ends up supporting families in the form of increased costs for everything from welfare to health care to education:

❑ The poverty rate for children in two-parent families is 8.4 percent, but for children in divorced families, it's 31.3 percent, and for children whose parents never married, it's 64.1 percent.[2]

❑ In 1996, only 30 percent of low-income children who lived apart from their fathers received child support.[3]

❑ A survey of over 20,000 parents by the National Center for Education Statistics found that children perform better in school, both academically and emotionally, when their fathers are involved with their schooling, including attending school meetings and volunteering at school.[4]

Some states have already launched fatherhood initiatives because they see father involvement as a key strategy for addressing the plight of children growing up in low-income, single-parent families. "This initiative is really about children," North Carolina Governor Jim Hunt said when he launched his state's fatherhood initiative in April 1999. "We know that to succeed in life, kids need a smart start, a good education and a nurturing household. With so many of our children now growing up in single-parent homes where resources are stretched to the breaking point, it's critical that we develop bold new approaches to reconnecting absentee fathers with their children."

How More Can Be Done

With flexible federal funding available, and given their tradition of innovation in social services, state governments are uniquely positioned to help fathers help their children. Governors can use their public influence, as well as their authority over state agencies and budgets, to make promoting responsible fatherhood a priority in social services programs.

State legislators can develop policy proposals of their own and draw attention to the importance of fatherhood through hearings and public events. And state agency officials can coordinate their services with community and faith-based organizations to ensure that fathers receive the support they need to nurture their children, both financially and emotionally.

Some of the most effective ideas highlighted in the report include these: Georgia offers non-custodial fathers whose children are on welfare a chance to enroll in job training programs at one of the state's 36 colleges and technical institutions. Wisconsin allows families on welfare to keep all of the child support collected on their behalf, providing an enormous incentive for fathers to pay child support because their families get to keep the money. And Virginia's Fatherhood Campaign helps communities across the state launch their own fatherhood programs.

This report also highlights promising community-based models that government can support – from the free legal clinics for parents who need advice on custody and visitation issues in Minneapolis, to the job-training program that the Indianapolis county prosecutor runs for fathers who can't pay child support, to a highly successful support group for young men in Philadelphia.

Megan Lombard

Gary Brown, a protégé of the Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization's Cleveland program, is studying to become a robotics engineer for NASA.

Why Now Is the Time

Four factors make it critical for states to act now:

❑ Working with fathers is the next logical step in our nation's efforts to reform welfare. States have experienced remarkable success in moving welfare recipients into jobs, but for too many families, the path from welfare to work has not led them out of poverty. The average wage for women leaving welfare is only $6.61 an hour.[5] For families struggling to leave welfare dependency behind, fathers who pay child support can help move their families from poverty to self-sufficiency.

❑ States now have funds available to invest in helping fathers, but many still aren't doing so. *Map and Track* notes that only 29 states are using either Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) or Welfare-to-Work (WtW) block grant funds to help low-income non-custodial fathers get jobs that enable them to support their children.[6] With $2.85 billion in TANF surpluses to spend, the states have resources to help both mothers and fathers of children on welfare move toward self-sufficiency.

❑ The enormous flexibility of the TANF block grant means states can use it to support two-parent family formation and reduce unwed births. These services – including parenting

SEVEN CORE LEARNINGS ABOUT FATHERS

The National Center on Fathers and Families, a policy research center at the University of Philadelphia, consulted with researchers and practitioners around the nation to create a list of seven key assumptions about fathers:

❑ Fathers care, even if that caring is not shown in conventional ways. Father caring may assume different forms – from emotional commitment to children's development to hands-on support in the home and responsibility for child care.

❑ Father presence matters – in terms of economic well-being, social support, and child development.

❑ Joblessness is a major impediment to family formation and father involvement. When the paths to work are unavailable or inaccessible, many fathers – particularly young fathers with few skills and few years of schooling – either evade the responsibility of supporting their children or turn to the underground economy to provide income.

❑ Existing approaches to public benefits, child support enforcement, and paternity establishment create obstacles and disincentives to father involvement. Many young fathers, and the mothers of their children, view paternity establishment and child support enforcement activities with distrust, seeing them as punitive rather than supportive of families.

❑ A growing number of young fathers and mothers need additional support to develop the vital skills to share the responsibility for parenting. Many children are growing up in these "fragile families" and need access to two parents committed to sharing the responsibilities of child care and support.

❑ The transition from biological father to committed parent has significant developmental implications for young fathers. For young fathers, this transition is often incomplete and problematic.

❑ Intergenerational beliefs and practices within families of origin significantly influence the behaviors of young parents. Families wield a great deal of influence over young parents, yet many families often do not have the resources or desire to assist young men in becoming better parents.

– *Adapted from "Core Learnings." National Center for Fathers and Families, February 1, 2000. Available online: http://www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu/core.htm*

education, relationship counseling, and mediation – can be provided to men or women, regardless of income level.

❑ Finally, an emerging body of research shows that a large percentage of low-income fathers are not the stereotypical "deadbeat dads" the public believes them to be.

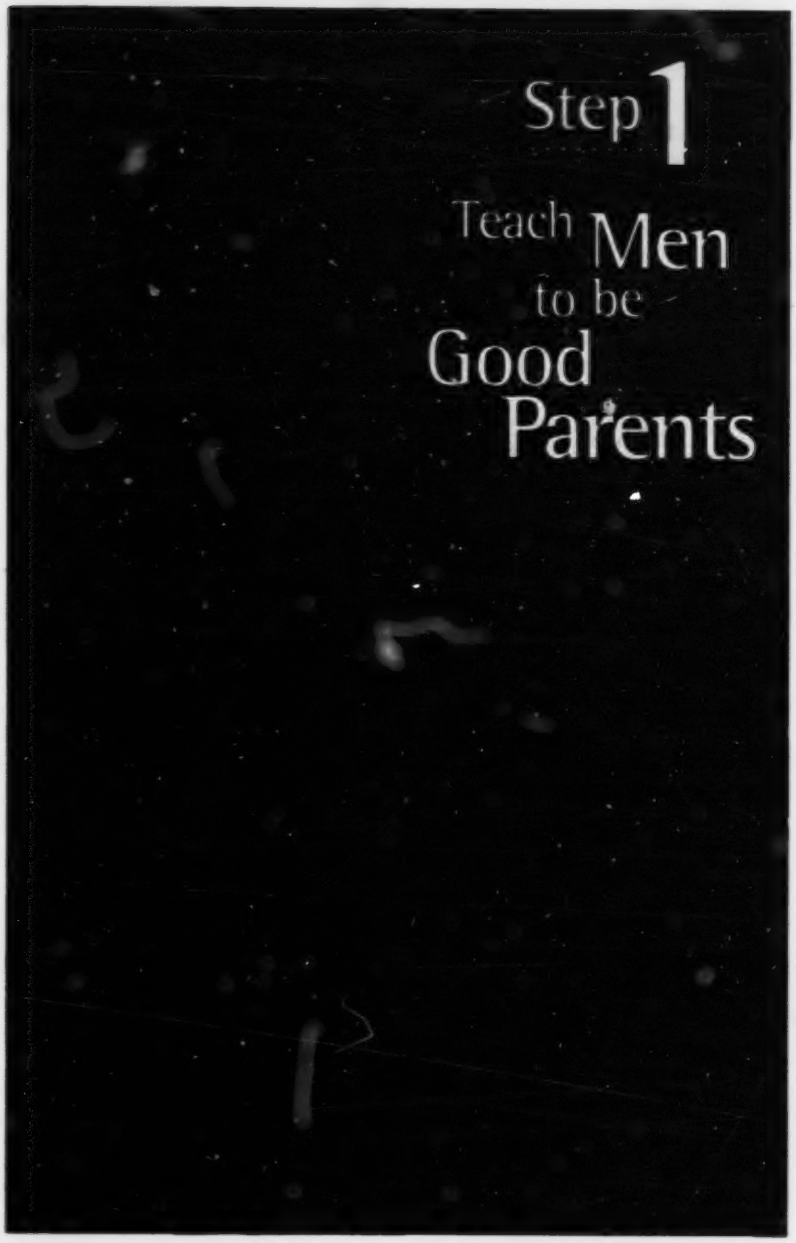
While the public may be skeptical about the efficacy of past government interventions for low-income fathers, new research supports the idea that joblessness – not lack of commitment – is a key reason behind men's failure to pay child support. An Urban Institute report finds that few low-income unwed fathers are able to find full-time, year-round employment and that they earn little more than minimum wage.[1]

Initial findings from a study by Princeton and Columbia Universities offer new support for the notion that low-income fathers care about their children. The Fragile Families study found that 78 percent of the low-income unwed fathers in Oakland and Austin had provided financial support during their partners' pregnancies; 86 percent planned to help with their children in the future.

And a study by the Erikson Institute and the University of Chicago also counters popular myths about poor fathers. Although 94 percent of the couples in a public housing project in Chicago were not married, two-thirds of the fathers were providing financial support and more than half were actively engaged in the day-to-day tasks of caring for their children.[2]

Given the need, the availability of flexible funding, and the promising research findings, this report offers policymakers a menu of options for promoting responsible fatherhood – especially among low-income non-custodial fathers.

The potential payoffs to adopting these strategies are immense. Fewer children will live in poverty, suffer from bad health, become involved in crime, and become unwed parents themselves. More children will graduate from high school, stay away from drugs, and become good parents themselves. It's time for states and communities to invest in fathers. This report tells how.



Regardless of economic status, education, race, or cultural background, many men lack one important skill – the skill of knowing how to be a father. In previous generations, the most critical qualification for being a good father was being a good provider. But children also need fathers as nurturers, teachers, and role models. The following excerpts come from the third edition of *Father Facts*, a publication of the National Fatherhood Initiative:

Children with fathers at home tend to do better in school, are less prone to depression, and are more successful in relationships.[10]

Father-child interaction has been shown to promote a child's well-being, perceptual abilities, and competency for relatedness with others, even at a young age.[11]

A survey of African American men revealed that men who had experienced a positive relationship with a father who cared and sacrificed for them are more likely to be responsible fathers themselves.[12]

A study using a national probability sample of 1,250 fathers showed that children whose fathers share meals, spend leisure time with them, or help them with reading and homework do significantly better academically than those children whose fathers do not.[13]

While the primary responsibility for teaching men to be fathers rests with families, not all families are able to prepare their sons for fatherhood. Some states and communities are developing programs to help fill in the gaps.

Teaching young men to be responsible fathers involves two approaches. First, it involves teaching them to delay parenting until they reach adulthood, are old enough to marry, and have the education and skills to support their children financially. Second, it means teaching all fathers – regardless of age, education, or income level – how to relate to their children in healthy and positive ways.

Attributes of Successful Programs

The Fatherhood Project of the Families and Work Institute lists five key attributes of successful parenting preparation programs that encourage young men to delay parenting.[14]

❑ First, the programs focus on the need for young men to act responsibly in all aspects of their lives – not just when it comes to sex. As Tom Henry of Total Commitment, a program for young men in Philadelphia, points out, many boys in low-income neighborhoods grow up without any sense that they can control their environments or that decisions they make as teenagers can affect the rest of their lives. Successful programs for boys help them understand the benefits of acting responsibly in their relationships with girls, in school, and in the workplace.

❑ Second, programs should set high expectations for young men. Carl Paige, who formerly worked at the Center for Fathers, Families, and Workforce Development (CFWD) in Baltimore, says that while programs shouldn't judge young men, they shouldn't baby young men either. "You need to ask the question, 'Are you prepared to work?'" Paige says. "They must be prepared to do what it takes to work eight hours a day, five days a week."

❑ Third, programs should have a separate curriculum and emphasis for young men. The strategies that work for teenage girls simply may not resonate for boys, who often have different role

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models and cultural references. For example, while young girls often relate to their peers by trying to fit in, boys are often more competitive.

❑ Fourth, good pregnancy prevention programs for boys give them hope for the future. Dwaine Simms, who works for MELD parenting education program, repeats a common refrain he hears from young fathers: "I don't expect to see my 25th birthday. I wanted to leave a legacy." Young men in low-income neighborhoods must learn about alternatives for proving their manhood.

❑ Fifth, successful programs provide boys a close connection to an adult role model – preferably a man. In low-income communities, father absence is often particularly high. Many studies show that men who become unwed fathers often grew up in fatherless homes themselves. And when they grow up without fathers at home, boys are more likely to have problems learning appropriate gender roles.

To these five attributes, many experts in the field have suggested a sixth: Good programs should prepare young men to assume the practical responsibilities of fatherhood. With home economics and life-skills programs disappearing from high school curricula, many young men are not exposed to the realities of balancing a checkbook, let alone changing a diaper or playing appropriately with a small child. Teaching these skills will not only help boys prepare for fatherhood – it may convince them that they are not ready to be fathers.

Teaching Fathers to Be Dads

States should look beyond prevention to helping men who are already fathers improve their parenting skills.

The Minneapolis-based MELD for Young Dads (MYD) is perhaps the most well established young fathers program in the nation. MELD has designed a comprehensive parenting curriculum that states, communities, and non-profits use when they work with MELD to establish comprehensive, community-based parent education programs. The 10-book curriculum includes 27 different topics ranging from pregnancy and birth to child development and health to legal issues such as child support and custody. It also includes practical advice on employment, education, and money management.

MELD staffers train site coordinators to use the curriculum and start their own programs. Site coordinators then train volunteers from the community to lead groups. In early 2000, the MELD for Young Dads program was operating in six U.S. cities. Most men participate in MELD on a voluntary basis – the program recruits in hospitals, schools, sports leagues, and other places frequented by young fathers. Some sites also take mandatory referrals from courts and probation offices. As incentives for participants, MELD sites provide free food, transportation, and child care at meetings.

MYD has served nearly 1,000 young fathers, whose average age is 18. MELD also has designed curricula for other target groups of parents, including new parents, Hmong parents, Latino parents, deaf parents, parents of special needs children, African-American teen mothers, young mothers, and single parents.

Another successful parenting program, Boot Camp for New Dads, was formed in 1988 to help new fathers of all ages and income levels. This 70-site community education program, generally based in hospitals, pairs first-time fathers with "veteran fathers" whose babies are two to three months old. The veterans help the new fathers, or soon-to-be-dads, learn how to hold, feed, change, and bathe their babies. New dads also learn about stages of child development and how to be supportive of their children's mothers. Within a few months, the new dads return as veterans, continuing the cycle.

©Greg Helgeson MELD 612-332-7563

MELD participants Linda and Michael Sullivan with their son Mikey.

Recommendations

❑ **State education agencies should revise their abstinence and/or sex education curricula to include components on fathering and the responsibilities of fatherhood.**

❑ State education agencies should require young men to study child health and development in school.

❑ Governors and legislators should offer technical assistance and financial support to community-based organizations and faith communities that organize fatherhood education and support groups.

❑ Governors and legislators should fund father involvement programs linked to programs serving new mothers, such as WIC and Healthy Start.

❑ Child support enforcement offices should link paternity establishment programs to support programs for new fathers. Fathers who establish paternity should have access to parenting education and support.

❑ Support programs that work with incarcerated fathers to help them learn to stay connected with their children while in prison and be better parents when they are released.

Examples from the Front Lines

Baltimore, Maryland

The Center for Fathers, Families, and Workforce Development (CFWD) works with low-income pregnant women to identify the fathers of their children and recruit these fathers for a year-long parenting support group. Men meet weekly to learn about issues ranging from the birthing process to child development to preventing unwanted

pregnancies. Because most of the participants are African-American, the CFWD curriculum focuses on giving men tools to cope with racism and take pride in their heritage.

The program also emphasizes "team parenting," the need for parents to respect and build healthy relationships, improve their decision-making skills, and communicate more effectively, even if they are not married. CFWD is developing a model team-parenting curriculum to implement nationwide.

Each year, more than 200 men participate in the voluntary program. CFWD recently added an employment component to its program: STRIVE, an intensive three-week job preparation class.

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Texas

The state attorney general's child support enforcement office developed PAPA (Paternity/Parenting Program) in 1995 and in 1999 distributed a curriculum to every middle and high school in Texas. PAPA is not a sex education program. Instead it focuses on the rights and responsibilities of parents. Students learn about the importance of establishing paternity and complete exercises such as computing child support payments and calculating the cost of raising a child from birth until age 18.

The PAPA staff has given presentations about fatherhood to more than 30,000 students, and anecdotal evidence suggests that the program has helped to lower Texas' teen pregnancy rate. The attorney general's office began revising the curriculum in early 2000 to focus more on non-financial fatherhood issues such as the importance of good parenting and the developmental needs of young children.

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California

The Non-Custodial Parent Demonstration Project, a $13.5 million project of the state's Department of Social Services Child Support Management Bureau, aims to increase child support collections by helping delinquent fathers increase their employment and earnings. But the program also helps fathers become more involved in the lives of their children.

At each of the seven program sites, participants attend parenting classes or peer groups that focus on parenting and relationship issues. At the Santa Barbara demonstration site, for example, fathers attend a 12-hour parenting class at a local community college. The class is open to the public so that fathers in the program do not feel stigmatized.

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Erie, Pennsylvania

Long Distance Dads is a character-based educational and support program designed to assist incarcerated men in developing skills to become more involved and supportive fathers. Incarcerated fathers attend 12 peer-facilitated weekly sessions, held in a small group format.

By 2000, the program was operating in more than 45 federal, state and county correctional institutions nationwide. The program staff found that many of the inmates were hesitant to speak frankly in front of prison staff members for fear that it would hurt their opportunities for parole. So they developed an intensive one-year program to train inmates as peer facilitators. These trained inmate peer leaders then co-facilitate fatherhood support groups under the supervision of prison staff.

The Long Distance Dads Curriculum focuses on helping fathers stay involved in their children's lives, managing anger, improving their communication skills, developing healthy relationships, coping with frustration, and preparing for life outside the prison. The Fathers Workshop, Inc., now affiliated with the National Fatherhood Initiative, offers the Long Distance Dads curriculum and training to prisons and community organizations throughout the country.

More than 400 inmates have participated in the Long Distance Dads program since 1996. Penn State University is conducting an independent evaluation of the program, to be completed in 2001.

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Other Resources

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For Further Reading

Father Facts, Third Edition, by Wade F. Horn. The National Fatherhood Initiative, 1999. The book offers a very useful synthesis of research and statistics about fathers and fatherlessness in the United States.

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New Expectations: Community Strategies for Responsible Fatherhood. by James A. Levine and Edward W. Pitt. Families and Work Institute. 1995. This book highlights dozens of programs nationwide that focus on teaching men of different ages, income levels, and ethnic background how to be good fathers.

Involving Males in Preventing Teen Pregnancy: A Guide for Program Planners. by Freya Sonenstein, Kellie Stewart, Laura Duberstein Lindberg, Marta Pernas, Sean Williams. The Urban Institute. December 1997. The Urban Institute's book profiles more than 20 programs nationwide that work with boys and young men to prevent teen pregnancies and repeat pregnancies. The book includes practical advice about program design.

The *Fatherlit* database, maintained by the National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF), includes abstracts more than 8,000 papers, books, and articles about fathers. The database can be accessed free from the NCOFF web site at www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu.

DEFYING THE ODDS: A TEEN FATHER'S STORY

All too often, fatherless boys grow up to be teen fathers. And while they start off with good intentions towards their children, many are unprepared for adulthood as well as fatherhood. Lacking the encouragement and support they need, many of these young men drift away from their children. But for a small group of men who gather in a recreation center in Philadelphia on Monday nights, the stories turn out differently.

Tom Henry, who was a teen father himself, offers young men a place to ask questions, vent frustrations about parenting, and face up to their responsibilities. Henry's program, Total Commitment, is open to any man who wants to attend.

Winford's story is typical. He was 15 and a freshman in high school when his girlfriend, also 15, became pregnant. Their son was born when Winford was 16. "I was pretty scared really, but I wanted her to have the baby," he remembers. "I was raised without a father, and I chose to do the opposite. I was going to be there."

Eight years later, Winford has kept his promise. Since his son was born, Winford has completed high school, attended community college, and found a full-time job as a lab technician at the University of Pennsylvania. He recently started a locksmith business on the side and has hopes of returning to college for a bachelor's degree in criminal justice. Most significantly, Winford has had custody of his son Armand for seven years.

What helped Winford avoid the rotten outcomes usually associated with teen parenthood? He credits two people: his mother, who helps him raise his son, and Tom Henry.

Winford heard about the group when Henry, a career employee at the University of Pennsylvania who runs Total Commitment on a volunteer basis, spoke at his high school. Winford had been seeing his infant son almost every day, but he knew he had a lot to learn about being a father and few places to find the answers to his questions. "There's a lot of support groups for women, for people on drugs, but nothing for men, just men," he says.

In Henry's program, Winford learned about parenting and dealt with the resentment he felt about his own father, whom he last saw as a five year-old. Henry encouraged him to stay in school, then helped him get a job in the lab. "He made me a better person," Winford says now. "He guided me in the right direction."

Most importantly, Winford says, participating in Total Commitment taught him decision-making skills. Every week, Henry requires participants to complete an exercise where they analyze a decision they've made, its wisdom, and its consequences. "Growing up and having a child doesn't make you a man," he says. "You need to learn responsible decision-making. If kids learned that in eighth grade, in fifth grade, maybe there wouldn't be so many teen parents."

Within a year of joining the group, Winford made an important adult decision. He was no longer involved with his son Armand's mother, and he discovered that she had no stable place to live. Winford petitioned the court for custody of his son. Initially the judge refused because Winford was still a minor, so his mother joined the petition. After eight trips to court, they received custody. Though Armand's mother received visitation rights, she rarely exercises them.

Winford's mother, a nurse, helped to care for Armand while Winford continued his education and then began to work. Winford and his son still live with her and his younger brother in the home where he grew up.

Winford says that his mother is a key reason that Armand is turning out so well. The boy is on the honor roll at school, "and he never gives us any problems. He is a good kid," Winford says. "If I had it to do over again, I probably wouldn't have had my son. But then again, if I'd known he was going to turn out the way he has, I'd have done it again in a second."

Winford remains close to the men in Total Commitment. After eight years, he still attends group sessions every Monday night. It hasn't always been pleasant; Winford says he has left many sessions angry or in tears. But he credits Tom Henry with helping him become an adult, get past his mistakes, and become a good father to his son. And he thinks that the long-term nature of his support group is key to its success. "If they'd have put me a program for six weeks, or six months," he says, "I don't think I'd be here today, talking about my accomplishments."

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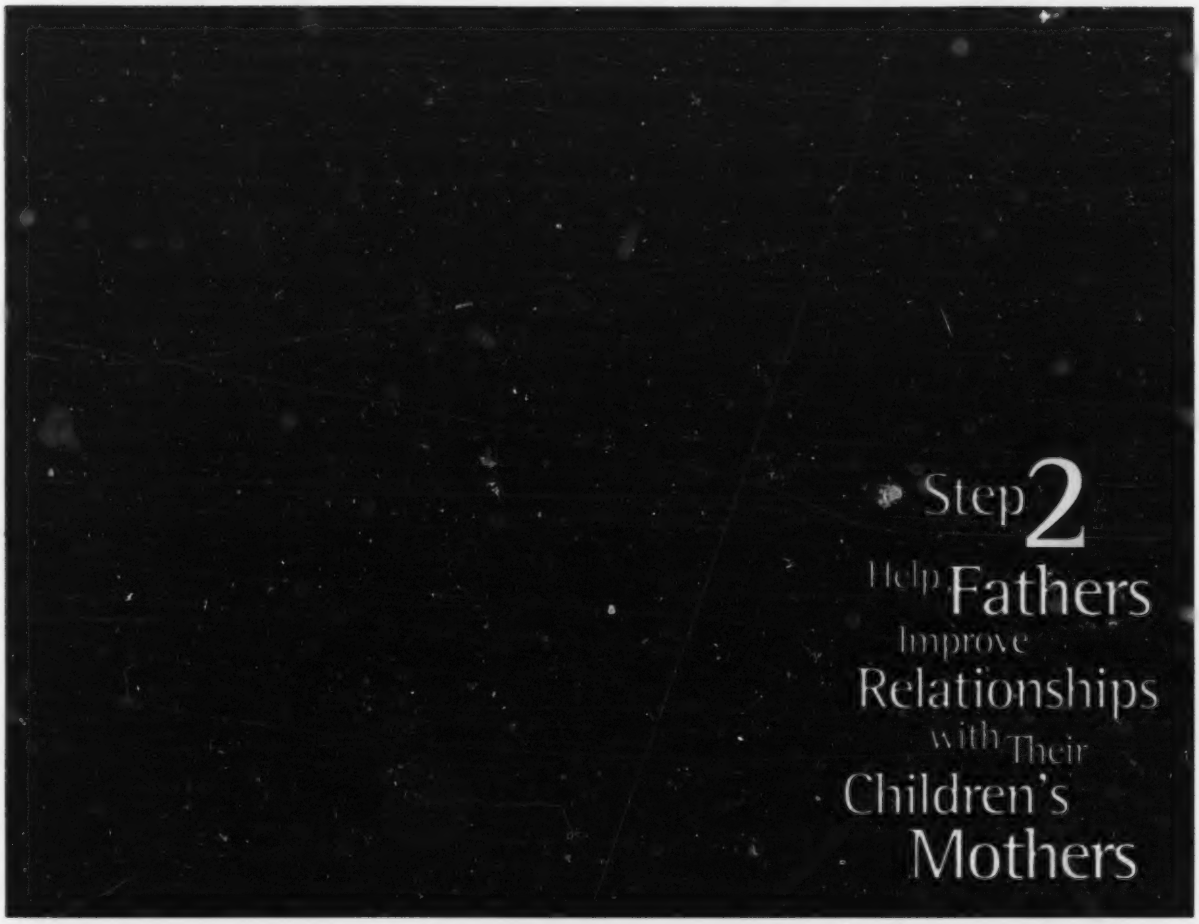

Step 2
Help Fathers Improve Relationships with Their Children's Mothers

Children do best when they are raised with two loving parents. And the circumstance most favorable to sustaining two-parent families is the institution of marriage.

According to Ron J. Clark, director of the Virginia Fatherhood Campaign, "One of the things we need to do is promote fatherhood in the context of marriage. There's a subtle fear of even mentioning marriage. We never talk about how marriage is good for people. It reduces welfare and increases economic support for families. At the same time, we need to recognize that some people shouldn't be married...I'm not saying, 'Stay with the abuse so your kids can be happy.' It's not just marriage – it's healthy marriage."

Indeed, two bills pending in Congress in early 2000 would establish grants to states and community-based organizations that promote marriage, and states such as Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin already have marriage initiatives of their own. As Theodora Ooms of the Resource Center on Couples and Marriage Policy in Washington, DC points out, marriage is like any other institution: People need to learn certain skills in order to navigate it effectively. Negotiation skills are particularly important, as are anger management and budgeting.

The need for such education is especially critical among low-income non-custodial fathers, many of whom were raised in mother-only families with few opportunities to see healthy, mature relationships between women and men. "Marriage," says Ooms, "is an ideal for these men. But they don't see how to get there."

Getting there isn't easy. Couples counseling is a well-established field, but most of its models, techniques, and practitioners are geared toward middle class couples. Ooms is working with the Center on Fathers, Families, and Workforce Development to design services that take into account the specific needs and issues of low-income families.

As states develop pro-marriage messages, they can look at model programs that encourage marriage and/or responsible parenting by couples.

One organization, the Institute for Responsible Fatherhood, has pioneered the "modeling" approach to marriage promotion. Instead of preaching to young people about the need to marry, the Institute focuses on teaching by example. A married couple runs each of the Institute's six neighborhood-based programs. The couples live in the communities they serve, running into Institute clients at schools, playgrounds, grocery stores, and on the street. They invite clients home for dinner. They offer healthy models of joint decision-making.

"We're not counselors," says Brian Jenkins, who with his wife Cesalie runs the Institute's site in Washington, DC. "This is about being a living model of change. We do promote marriage as the best model, but we don't advocate, 'You marry this person,'" he says. "How great would it be for two parents to love, care for, and nurture this child, even if they're not together?"

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The Importance of Co-parenting

Even when couples choose not to marry, there is much that public policy can do to help them – before and after they become parents – learn to develop healthy relationships and work together to raise their children.

Some programs, such as the Maternity Care Coalition in Philadelphia, focus on teaching parents who are not married how to parent together, and how to resolve their differences. The program is "child-centered," says Greg Patton, who runs teen parenting programs in the Philadelphia schools. "It's not about the mom or the dad, it's about what's good for the child."

The Los Angeles County Department of Community and Senior Services (CSS) Parents' Fair Share Programs unit, which does not explicitly promote marriage, has developed an entire curriculum that covers "Co-P'ing" or co-parenting. "We help fathers learn a new language," program manager Geraldo Rodriguez says. "They learn to avoid communication that enrages the mother. We teach them to approach their ex in a more positive way. Until you bring it home to them, they don't understand what mothers go through."

What About Domestic Violence?

Some women's advocates have voiced concerns that in a rush to promote marriage, states may fail to heed the very real concerns that many women have about the fathers of their children. "Oftentimes, the father can be somebody who makes the mother nervous about leaving the children with him, either because of domestic violence, or because he's irresponsible," points out Vicki Turetsky of the Center for Law and Social Policy.

Statistics about domestic violence support these concerns. Up to 60 percent of women on public assistance report a history of abuse. Up to 30 percent are currently victims of domestic violence.[5]

Some programs have begun to address this concern. The Los Angeles CSS-Parents' Fair Share programs obtained TANF funds from the county welfare department to establish a program for domestic violence victims on welfare. A local community services agency helps to recruit participants, as do several domestic violence shelters. Clients attend at least six domestic violence and parenting seminars, participate in support groups, and receive intensive individual counseling. When possible, the program provides counseling to non-custodial parents (usually the accused batterers) as well.

When appropriate, domestic violence program staff members work with both parents to help them develop a non-violent arrangement for raising their children. Conversely, staff members also identify and take action in which the non-custodial parent presents a potential danger to the family.

Recommendations

❑ **Legislators should enact laws requiring** or encouraging pre-marital counseling before couples get marriage licenses – and make sure that free counseling is available to couples regardless of income levels or religious preferences.

❑ Governors and legislators should provide funding and technical assistance to charitable organizations that focus on culturally sensitive couples' counseling and/or model marriage, and provide training and start-up help to fatherhood programs that want to include components on healthy relationships.

❑ State child support, health, welfare, and workforce development agencies should require fatherhood programs that receive state funds to train their staff in how to spot domestic violence, report suspected abuse, and provide referrals to domestic violence services.

Examples from the Front Lines

Los Angeles, California

The CSS Parents' Fair Share "Responsible Fatherhood" curriculum, developed by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, helps non-custodial parents work out visitation, custody, and other parenting issues. CSS Parents' Fair Share staff members work with fathers to identify problems they have with the mothers of their children.

The staff then invites the mothers to participate in a six-session custodial parents' support group, utilizing the "Co-P'ing" curriculum that focuses on the importance of fathers in children's lives, how mothers can communicate more effectively with fathers, how they can stand up for their own rights, and how they can mediate conflicts. Staff members then meet with both parents for at least three mediation sessions to help them negotiate their relationships and develop healthy communications skills. Participants may receive six months of follow-up mediation services as needed.

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Greater Grand Rapids, Michigan

When Mayor Bill Hardiman of Kentwood, a Grand Rapids suburb, wanted to promote marriage in his community, he contacted Marriage Savers. Founded in 1993 by Mike McManus, an evangelical Christian columnist, Marriage Savers has helped over 100 communities develop "Community Marriage Policies." These policies encourage clergy to promote marriage through marriage preparation classes, pre-marital counseling, marriage mentoring, and post-marriage retreats. Marriage Savers also works with local business and community leaders.

The Greater Grand Rapids Community Marriage Policy (CMP) receives institutional support from Pine Rest, a Christian community health center. The CMP, which is funded entirely by charitable donations and has an annual budget of about $100,000, strives to be inclusive of different points of view about marriage. The steering committee, chaired by Hardiman, includes business leaders, college presidents, health care professionals, and clergy. The group has reached out to battered women's advocates and minority leaders who work with single-parent families to emphasize that the CMP does not intend to stigmatize single-parent families or keep women in abusive marriages.

So far, the CMP has sponsored marriage preparation classes and training for clergy, and in 2000, the group planned to push proposals for marriage education in schools and marriage-friendly work places.

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Tennessee

The state has granted the Institute for Responsible Fatherhood a $300,000 annual contract to run a pilot project in Nashville to assist low-income fathers and families with parenting, relationship, and employment issues. The program serves about 200 families each year. A University of Tennessee School of Social Work evaluation found that families participating in the program reported receiving higher child support payments and experiencing less domestic violence. Participating families also reported that fathers had become more involved with their children and more supportive of mothers, both financially and emotionally.

Megan Lombard

Unmarried teen father Albert Stevens of Milwaukee embraces his daughter Tiniyah as her mother LaToya Collins watches approvingly. Stevens is a protégé of the Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization.

©Greater Grand Rapids Community Marriage Policy

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Other Resources

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For Further Reading

Toward More Perfect Unions: Putting Marriage on the Public Agenda, by Theodora Ooms. Family Impact Seminar, July 1998. Ooms encourages states to focus on promoting marriage and preventing the causes of marital decline through policies such as removing financial disincentives for marriage, investing in marriage education, and creating marriage-friendly work places.

Fathers, Marriage and Welfare Reform, by Wade F. Horn and Andrew Bush. Hudson Institute. Wade and Bush, in collaboration with the Hudson Institute, focus on the importance of states implementing welfare reforms that not only focus on job placement, but also bring fathers back to their families.

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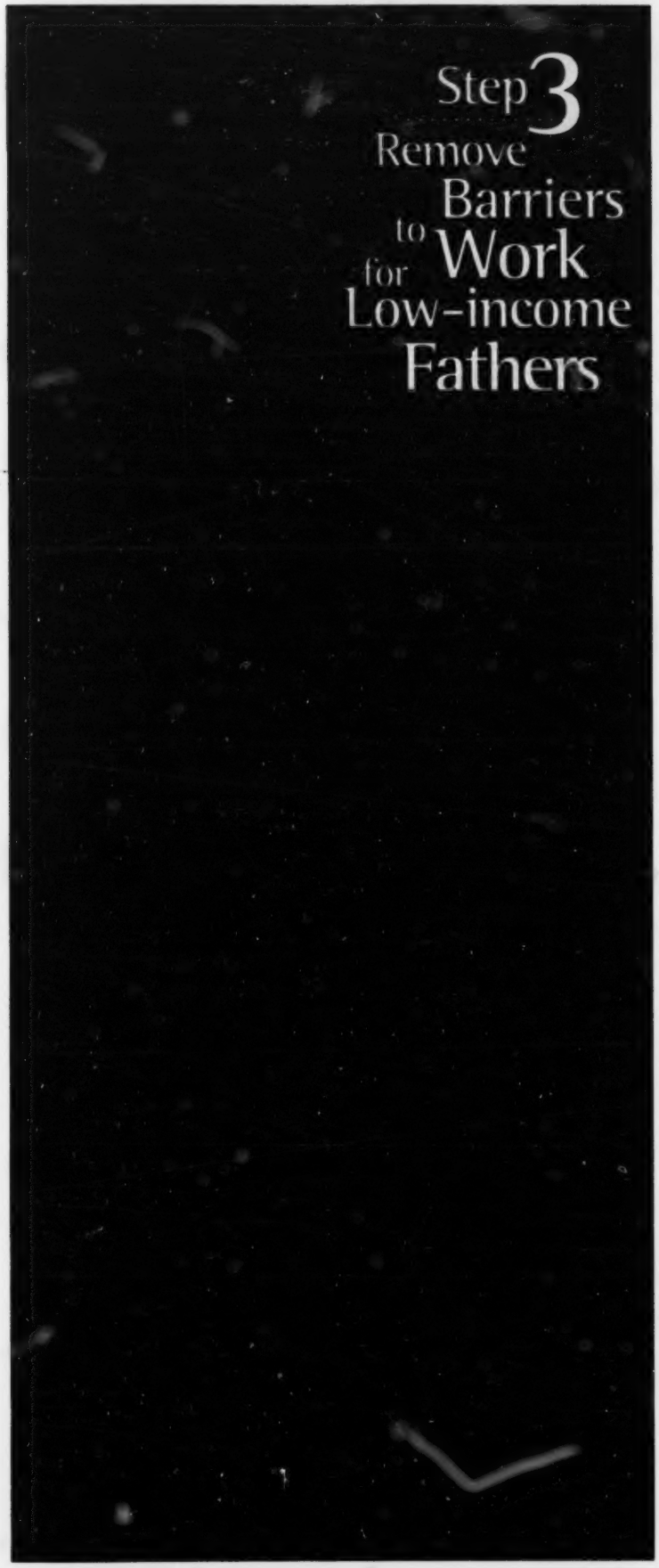


Step 3 Remove Barriers to Work for Low-income Fathers

One of the most promising solutions for reducing childhood poverty in the United States – and promoting the formation of married, two-parent families – is helping low-income unwed fathers find work. As Harvard University professor William Julius Wilson has argued, the more encouraging a couple's economic situation, the more likely they are to get married. Wilson believes that joblessness makes many low-income men "unmarriage-able."

Stereotypes about men who are lazy and unwilling to work persist; in some cases they are true. But the larger truth is that for many low-income men, the barriers to work and marriage are nearly insurmountable.

Research Contradicts the Stereotypes

Research shows that the majority of the fathers who fail to meet child support obligations are uneducated, unskilled, and – perhaps most significantly – disconnected from social supports that might help them overcome these deficits.

❑ The 1990 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) found that nationwide, 3.4 million non-custodial fathers had incomes below 200 percent of poverty. The Urban Institute's analysis of data about these fathers found that on average, they had only 11 years of education.[16]

❑ Only 10 percent of these fathers worked full time, year round. About 45 percent worked intermittently, and about one-third were not able to find work at all. Even more telling is the fact that the average wage for these men was only $5.40 per hour, and their average annual income was $3,932 ($8,956 in 1998 dollars).[17]

❑ While there is a popular notion that employment programs are readily accessible for low-income unwed fathers, only six percent of the low-income non-custodial fathers in the 1990 SIPP study had participated in the Job Training Partnership Act programs, then the largest of the federal employment programs.[18]

In addition, many low-income fathers have legal barriers to employment, such as criminal records and suspended driver's licenses, which make them even less attractive to employers.

❑ Three-quarters of the fathers in the SIPP sample had been arrested or were experiencing ongoing legal problems; 46 percent had been convicted of a crime.[19] Helping low-income men overcome their barriers to employment is a key part of the equation

for many programs that promote responsible fatherhood. Some programs are mandatory; the courts require men who fall behind in their child support obligations to participate in employment programs or go to jail. Others are voluntary, offering employment services as an incentive to encourage men to pay child support.

What It Takes to Help Some Fathers

Whatever the circumstances that lead low-income men into jobs programs, the services must be comprehensive. Services that any employment program for fathers should provide include:

- ❑ One-on-one case management and counseling
- ❑ Resumé and interview preparation
- ❑ Job-search assistance
- ❑ Access to short-term training programs
- ❑ Access to longer certificate or degree-granting training programs for fathers who are academically qualified
- ❑ On-the-job training and other paid work experience
- ❑ Referrals to medical, mental health, and substance abuse treatment services
- ❑ Access to professional clothing
- ❑ Transportation assistance
- ❑ Job-retention services, including mediation between workers and employers if needed

Other Obstacles

Too often, however, traditional employment services are not enough for low-income unwed fathers. In addition to those who have criminal records, many also have suspended driver's licenses – and are facing further legal action – for failing to pay child support.

When faced with legal obstacles such as these, most low-income fathers don't have the resources to overcome these problems. "Low-income mothers have all kinds of support and help navigating the system," says Greg Patton of the Philadelphia school district. "Fathers don't."

The FATHER Project in Minneapolis provides clients some of that support. Through its partnership with the county child support enforcement office, the program offers clients help in resolving child support-related legal matters. The program also helps participants get their driver's and professional licenses back and establish or contest paternity. Perhaps most importantly, the child support enforcement office helps participants negotiate lower child-support payments until they find better jobs.

But for many low-income fathers, their legal problems extend far beyond the child support system. James' story is typical: a father of two, separated from his wife, he has a criminal record. He is trying to find work but has lost his driver's license and faces a jail term – because he cannot afford to pay the fines and late fees on several unpaid traffic tickets.

Employment and training programs with lawyers on staff or with links to legal services programs can help men like James resolve relatively minor legal matters that become barriers to employment. Legal staff can help participants negotiate legal fines and penalties, get criminal records sealed or expunged, fight housing evictions, and facilitate bankruptcy proceedings.

Recommendations

❑ **State workforce development and welfare agencies should require employment programs receiving state funds to partner with or provide referrals to parenting programs for non-custodial fathers. Conversely, state health and welfare agencies should require parenting education programs to link their activities with programs that focus on employment and training.**

❑ Governors and legislators should require state and county courts to refer men with child-support arrearages to employment programs, as the federal welfare reform law gives states authority to do.

❑ Governors and legislators should require child support enforcement offices to coordinate with responsible fatherhood programs and pursue modification orders for low-income fathers who are making good-faith efforts to find and keep jobs.

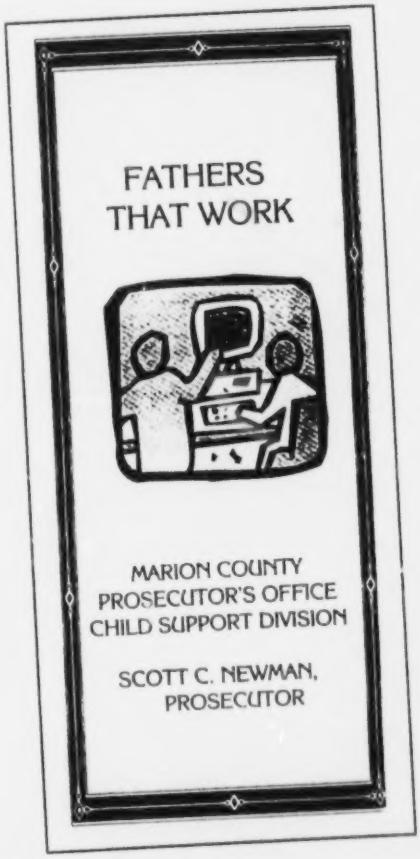
❑ Governors and legislators should use TANF funds to provide grants that enable employment and training programs for low-income men and women to hire lawyers or develop partnerships with legal services offices that help clients overcome legal barriers to employment.

Examples from the Front Lines

Marion County (Indianapolis), Indiana

The Marion County prosecutor's office founded the Fathers That Work program in 1996 to provide services for fathers (and non-custodial mothers) facing court action for unpaid child support. Most participants attend because of court orders, but the program also accepts volunteers, and the prosecutor keeps staff members on call at all times to meet with fathers who claim they can't afford to pay child support.

The prosecutor's office has developed relationships with 29 area employers and agencies including job training organizations like Goodwill Industries and employers like Federal Express. The program's staff keeps track of each agency's vacancies and eligibility requirements. Staff members refer



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Eric Golliday, a participant in the Fathers That Work program of the Marion County Prosecuting Attorney's office, meets with referral specialist Candice Hall, who helps him assess his skills and career goals.

Aaron Floyd, another participant in the Indianapolis-based Fathers That Work program, got help finding a manufacturing job that pays over $11 an hour.

fathers directly to employers with jobs available; they refer men with barriers to employment such as criminal records or low skills to job training programs or community service with the city of Indianapolis.

In 1999, more than 1,700 people participated in the program; 64 percent of fathers who get jobs through the program are still employed after six months. The prosecutor also runs a mediation program for non-custodial parents and helps fathers under age 25 obtain flexible support orders so that they can stay in school.

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Minneapolis, Minnesota

The FATHER Project works with eight neighborhood-based employment centers to provide whatever fathers need – resumé and interview preparation, job-search assistance, short-term training, on-the-job training, and job retention services. "Father advocates" work one-on-one with fathers, providing intensive case management services. If a father needs a reference or a ride to an interview, for example, a father advocate can help.

The FATHER Project originally planned to serve only young fathers, ages 16 through 25. But in 1999, the project won a $1.86 million federal Welfare-to-Work grant to provide employment services to older men as well.

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Minneapolis, Minnesota

The Resource Center for Fathers and Families, a private non-profit with six locations in the Minneapolis area, works to prevent family violence and create an atmosphere where both parents can raise their children effectively. The center offers parenting advice, support groups, anger management classes, relationship classes, a crisis hotline, and referrals to services for all parents regardless of income level, though 85 percent of its clients are low-income. All services are open to both men and women.

The center also sponsors about 10 legal seminars each month. For a $10 fee (waived in hardship cases), men and women can seek legal advice from attorneys on issues such as paternity establishment, child support, and grandparents' visitation rights. Each year, about 1,000 people attend these legal seminars. The program also refers parents who need representation in court to a network of lawyers who charge $50 an hour or charge on a sliding fee basis.

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Santa Clara County, California

The District Attorney's Non-Custodial Parent Employment and Training Project, which serves fathers with unpaid child support whose children are on TANF, uses both carrots and sticks to get men to participate. Some clients are volunteers, recruited in hospitals and through a multi-lingual public awareness campaign in the community; others are ordered to participate by the courts. For those who refuse, the district attorney can seek jail time. For those who participate, the district attorney gets their monthly child support payments lowered to $50. The program provides employment and counseling services for men, with extra features such as a 24-hour job retention hotline.

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Baltimore, MD

The Center for Fathers, Families, and Workforce Development recently added an employment component to its fatherhood program: STRIVE, an intensive three-week job-preparation class modeled after a highly successful program in East Harlem, NY. STRIVE is almost like boot camp. Participants attend eight hours a day, and instructors model their tough-love behavior on that of drill sergeants.

STRIVE's focus is on "attitude training" – preparing participants for the world of work. Clients learn to dress professionally, impress employers in interviews, communicate respectfully,

and take direction from supervisors. At the end of the three-week class, STRIVE Baltimore offers job placement and retention services for two years. While CFWD focuses on fathers, its STRIVE program is open to participants regardless of gender. Women comprise about half of each class.

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For Further Reading

Broke but Not Deadbeat: Reconnecting Low-Income Fathers and Children, by Dana Reichert. National Conference of State Legislatures, July 1999. Reichert's guide is one of the best available in terms of giving detailed advice to states, communities, and non-profits that want to start programs for low-income fathers. She offers advice on program design, target service populations, and funding.

Connecting Low-Income Fathers and Families: A Guide to Practical Policies, by Dana Reichert. National Conference of State Legislatures, June 2000. This new guide offers state policymakers specific ideas about options for helping low-income non-custodial fathers.

Building Opportunities, Enforcing Obligations: Implementation and Interim Impacts of Parents' Fair Share, by Fred Doolittle, Virginia Knox, Cynthia Miller, and Sharon Rowser. Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, September 1998. This report, a comprehensive evaluation of the Parents' Fair Share pilot program, includes valuable data on fathers who participated in the program, as well as findings about what worked – and what didn't – in an employment and parenting program for fathers who fell behind on their child support payments.

"Non-Custodial Fathers: What We Know and What's Left to Learn?" by Elaine Sorensen, in *Nurturing Fatherhood: Improving Data and Research on Male Fertility*, Family Formation and Fatherhood. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, June 1998. Sorensen uses data from the 1990 Survey of Income and Program Participation to paint the clearest statistical picture available of low-income non-custodial fathers.

DOING THINGS RIGHT: PARENTS' FAIR SHARE

Los Angeles County Department of Community and Senior Services

The peer support group at the Florence/Firestone Service Center in Compton, California doesn't start until 9 a.m., but one of the men arrives early to make coffee. By 9 a.m., four non-custodial fathers – all older than 30, all unemployed, all of whom owe child support, and all of whom have criminal records – are trading stories about their children. One member laments that his 14-year-old daughter has begun dating, asking the group if his attitude is too strict. Another is clearly proud that he treated his five-year old daughter to Burger King and the Pokemon movie.

Larry Littleton, the social worker who facilitates the group, quickly steers the conversation away from movies and onto the day's topic: manhood and fatherhood. For the next two hours, the men discuss their views on the male role in relationships and in the household. Littleton asks them if their own parents provided good role models of marriage and parenting. For most participants, the answer is no. Throughout the session, Littleton guides the conversation, asking probing questions, prodding reluctant participants, and – above all – refraining from making judgments about the men for past mistakes.

One of the program's hallmarks is its positive approach. "We start with the assumption that people generally want to be good fathers," says program manager Geraldo Rodriguez. "They just don't know how."

Los Angeles County's programs for low-income fathers, called Parents' Fair Share, got their start in 1994 as part of a nationwide pilot project. When the pilot ended in 1998, Rodriguez and the project's other manager, Linda Jenkins of the district attorney's office, convinced California's social services department to continue the PFS experiment. Three Los Angeles-area state legislators sponsored a bill to authorize a Non-Custodial Parent Demonstration (NCPD), which now operates in seven counties. For fiscal year 2000, the state allocated $8.6 million in TANF funds, $1.5 million in federal Title IV-D child support enforcement funds, and $3.4 million in child support collections to the seven sites.

The state-funded NCPD program in Los Angeles has retained as its core 18 intensive two-hour peer group sessions, which use the curriculum designed for the pilot project. But instead of focusing first on job-search assistance, the Los Angeles program brings in professional employment and training counselors to test clients' skills and aptitudes, help them prepare resumes, learn how to handle job interviews, provide any necessary skills training and, finally, refer them to potential employers.

In addition to the NCPD program, the Los Angeles Parents' Fair Share program runs two

complementary programs under its umbrella. PFS won a competitive Welfare-to-Work grant from the U.S. Department of Labor to focus on strategies to help fathers keep their jobs and increase earnings. And, perhaps most creatively, Rodriguez persuaded the county to give the program TANF funds to start a domestic violence program for those with histories of abuse. In all, the Los Angeles County CSS-PFS programs have a budget of about $2.1 million per year, not including federal job training funds; these funds support eight offices across the vast Los Angeles Basin.

CSS-PFS programs are run by the county Department of Community and Senior Services with cooperation from the District Attorney's Office, Bureau of Family Support Operations, and the state's Employment Development Department.

From the start, interagency cooperation has been key to the program's success. According to Rodriguez, "Usually the D.A. and the welfare department work in isolation." Yet these agencies work closely together on behalf of PFS fathers. "We will not do anything with a client without sharing information," says Rodriguez. In another key feature of the Los Angeles PFS program, staff members from each agency meet regularly for "case conferencing" to develop plans for clients and discuss their progress.

Unlike the pilot program, participation in the CSS-PFS programs is voluntary. But CSS-PFS offers a big incentive. If fathers stick with the program, the district attorney lowers their current child-support obligations to $50 a month and reinstates driver's licenses that have been suspended for non-payment of support.

PFS serves nearly 400 fathers a year at a cost of about $5,000 per participant, plus the cost of employment services. In the five years since the program began, 2,000 men have completed the program. The latest statistics show that 40 percent of participants found full-time unsubsidized jobs paying an average wage of $8.70 an hour.

Among the program's biggest challenges: 55 percent of all PFS clients have criminal records.

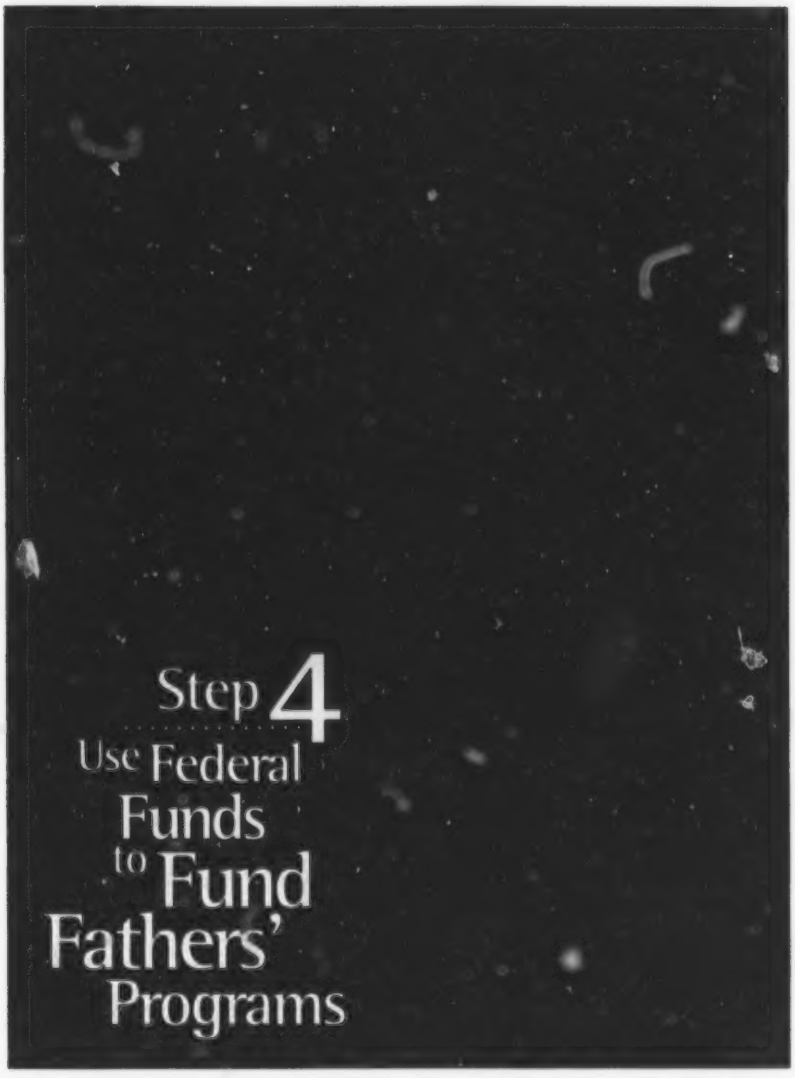
The program's staff advises clients to be honest with employers. "The moment a client hedges on a question," says Rodriguez, "he's done for. They need to be as honest and up front about their criminal records as they can. We try to help them deal with the shame and guilt they feel about it." The program relies on its good relationships with local employers who are willing to give PFS participants second chances.

The men in the Florence/Firestone group admit they were skeptical at the outset. "I thought the D.A. was going to just get me a job so I could pay child support," one says. "I thought, I'll just go the 10 weeks, get my license back, and I'll be gone," another says.

But they have quickly become invested. Albert, an unmarried father of a six-year old girl, says he has been looking for something like it ever since he got out of prison – "Because prison just hardens you, man, you've got to be tough" – but didn't know where to look. George, a divorced father of four, is even more enthusiastic. "I look forward to coming to class. We're like a family. It's a blessing." Within a month of joining the program, George had found a job at a local warehouse paying $7.25 an hour.

That's not to say the program is perfect. Albert criticizes the job-placement services, saying that more intensive job training and interview preparation is needed. All of the men wish that the program would do more to help them get their TANF-related arrearages – which range from $2,000 to $29,000 – reduced or forgiven.

Overall, these CSS-PFS participants are grateful for the program. Says William, an unmarried father of five, "You know, there are times in the group where I get angry. Instead of them putting me down they say, 'Hey, we understand where you're coming from.'"



Step 4 Use Federal Funds to Fund Fathers' Programs

Whether they focus on parenting, relationships, employment, or all three, responsible fatherhood programs have one thing in common: They need funding. Fortunately, in an era of block grants and declining welfare caseloads, states have several sources of funds to choose from – and tremendous flexibility to use them for fatherhood programs.

Few states, however, are taking full advantage of these opportunities. Many use small amounts of their federal child support enforcement funds to support responsible fatherhood efforts. But according to the 1999 edition of *Map and Track*, only 29 states reported using either Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) or Welfare-to-Work (WtW) funds to help low-income non-custodial fathers get jobs.[20]

TANF and State Maintenance of Effort Funds

The federal (TANF) block grant is the single best funding source for fatherhood programs. One of the important features of the 1996 federal welfare reform was its shift in focus from women and children only to entire families. State spending, however, has not followed that shift. States use the majority of their block grant and Maintenance-of-Effort (MOE) funds to support current welfare recipients or to provide transitional assistance for those who have recently left the welfare rolls. With $2.85 billion in TANF surpluses available in 2000, states should target some of these funds to non-custodial parents.

Federal block grant funds and state funds can be used for any activity that accomplishes the broad purposes of welfare reform: ending welfare dependence, promoting employment, encouraging two-parent families, and reducing out-of-wedlock pregnancies.

States may set eligibility requirements for services related to each of these goals, and states may choose to set different requirements for different services. For example, a state may set one income eligibility level for cash aid, but a different level for employment services or child care. Even more importantly, as long as services are not being used to meet recipients' "basic needs" – such as cash assistance – time limits do not apply. Additionally, programs or services to encourage two-parent families or reduce out-of-wedlock pregnancies can be used to target any population group; they are not limited to low-income families.

TANF and state MOE funds can be used to pay for services such as employment assistance, job training, substance abuse treatment, mentoring, counseling, marriage counseling, mediation, transportation, child care, access and visitation services, and child support pass-throughs. States can use Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) funds for similar purposes.

The Welfare-to-Work Block Grant

In 1999, Congress enacted legislation that makes another funding source, the Welfare-to-Work block grant, significantly easier to for states to use. States may now spend these funds on employment services for any non-custodial parents who meet certain criteria.

First, they must be unemployed, underemployed, or having difficulty paying child support. Second, their minor children must have received TANF in the past year or be eligible for food stamps, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Medicaid, or the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). Finally, parents must sign personal responsibility contracts committing them to establishing paternity, paying child support, and participating in employment services.

States may use this funding for an array of employment services, including job readiness classes, on-the-job training, up to six months of vocational training, subsidized work, and job-retention services.

Workforce Investment Act

The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) is a significant new funding source for programs that serve low-income unwed fathers. WIA replaces the old Job Training Partnership Act system with a one-stop job training and placement system that emphasizes state and local control.

Yet many fathers may be left behind. Only six percent of low-income unwed fathers participated in Job Training Partnership Act programs,[4] and many Private Industry Councils privately acknowledge that they are not preparing to serve these men under the new Workforce Investment Act.

The reason? Quite simply, low-income unwed fathers are tough to serve – and the Workforce Investment Act penalizes states for failing to place people in jobs. Providers have incentives to weed out more difficult clients, even though these clients are often those most in need of services.

States and communities have one option for experimenting with Workforce Investment Act funds without fear of penalties. The Workforce Investment Act authorizes the Department of Labor to conduct demonstration and pilot projects "for the purpose of developing and implementing techniques and approaches, and demonstrating the effectiveness of specialized methods, in addressing employment and training needs." Some of these demonstration projects can, and should, focus on low-income non-custodial fathers.

Recommendations

❑ **Governors and legislators should set aside a percentage of TANF and Welfare-to-Work funds for programs that serve low-income non-custodial parents.**

❑ State workforce development agencies should apply to the U.S. Department of Labor to launch non-custodial fathers demonstration projects under the Workforce Investment Act.

Above, left: Dadisi Elliott of the Responsible Teen Fathers Program talks with Kenneth Woods about being a father.

Above, right: In 1999, the City of Long Beach held its first conference on fatherhood.

❑ Governors and legislators should reserve any bonuses that the state receives under TANF or the Title IV-D federal child support enforcement program to serve non-custodial parents.

❑ Governors and legislators should revise and simplify eligibility requirements for non-custodial parents to participate in TANF-funded programs. For example, any parent – regardless of income – should be eligible for mediation, custody and visitation services, and parenting classes. Any non-custodial parent who is unemployed or underemployed and whose child qualifies for CHIP should be eligible for employment services. (In most states, CHIP is available to any child whose household income is below 185 percent of the federal poverty level.)

Examples from the Front Lines

Long Beach, California

At least one program has used federal workforce development funds to specialize in serving young fathers: the Long Beach Job Start Center. The Private Industry Council (PIC) that oversees the center decided in 1998 to try to do more for young fathers who were stopping by its headquarters in a local mall. The PIC allocated about $150,000 in JTPA (now Workforce Investment Act) funds to launch the Responsible Teen Fathers Program. The program's staff members have broad discretion to offer any services that help young men overcome barriers to employment, including individual counseling and a weekly peer support group.

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Georgia

The state office of child support enforcement receives $5 million in Social Services Block Grant funds each year to run the Georgia Fatherhood Program, which serves low-income non-custodial parents who lack a high school diploma and whose children are on TANF. The program offers fathers who participate technical training, job placement, opportunities to earn their GEDs, counseling, and parenting skills classes.

The Georgia Department of Technical and Adult Education provides the job-training component at 36 colleges and technical institutions statewide, in fields such as welding, computer repair, automotive repair, and carpentry. Participants also take classes that teach life skills, such as interviewing for a job, and managing finances. Finally, participants may choose to attend classes that focus on parenting skills, child development, and parent-child relationships. Of the 450 parents who completed the program in 1998, 80 percent found jobs and now pay child support.

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Arkansas

The state is using its Welfare-to-Work block grant funds to ensure that non-custodial parents with children on TANF receive the same help getting and keeping jobs that custodial parents on TANF get. Any non-custodial parent with a child on TANF is eligible.

The state child support enforcement office works with the state welfare department to identify eligible fathers and connect them to the local Private Industry Councils, which provide services.

Through the PICs, fathers can participate in subsidized and unsubsidized employment, community-service programs, work experience, wage-subsidy and job-creation programs, and on-the-job training. After they find jobs, non-custodial parents also can take advantage of basic education, English-as-a-Second Language courses, occupational skills training, and mentoring.

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Other Resources

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USING TANF FUNDS FOR FATHERS

Under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996, states may use the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families block grant for any of the following four purposes:

1. "Provide assistance to needy families so that the children may be cared for in their homes or in the homes of relatives."

2. "End the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage."

3. "Prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and establish annual numerical goals for preventing and reducing the incidence of these pregnancies."

4. "Encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families."

For purposes 1 and 2, states may spend the money only on "needy" families. However, states have broad latitude in defining need and may define need differently for various purposes. For instance, states can define low-income custodial parents as "needy" and eligible for cash assistance. But states can use a different definition of "needy" when considering whether non-custodial parents are eligible for employment and training programs.

Under purposes 3 and 4, states may serve families regardless of income.

Below are some examples of how states can use their TANF funds to help fathers:

- ❑ provide needy fathers with job-skills training, job placement assistance, job retention services, or any other work-related services
- ❑ pass-through child support collections to families
- ❑ fund responsible fatherhood initiatives that help needy fathers support their children financially and emotionally
- ❑ offer parenting classes, pre-marital and marriage counseling, and mediation services for couples
- ❑ provide transportation allowances, transit passes, or tokens to needy fathers who need help getting to work
- ❑ offer mental health counseling, anger management counseling, and substance abuse counseling (but not medical treatment) to fathers
- ❑ pay for domestic violence counseling
- ❑ create a state Earned Income Tax Credit
- ❑ give stipends to needy fathers who continue their education while they are working
- ❑ support media campaigns to encourage fathers' involvement in their children's lives
- ❑ change TANF eligibility rules to provide incentives for single parents to marry

– *Adapted from* Helping Families Achieve Self-Sufficiency: A Guide on Funding Services for Children and Families through the TANF Program. *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance. December 21, 1999. Available online: http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs /ofa/funds2.pdf*

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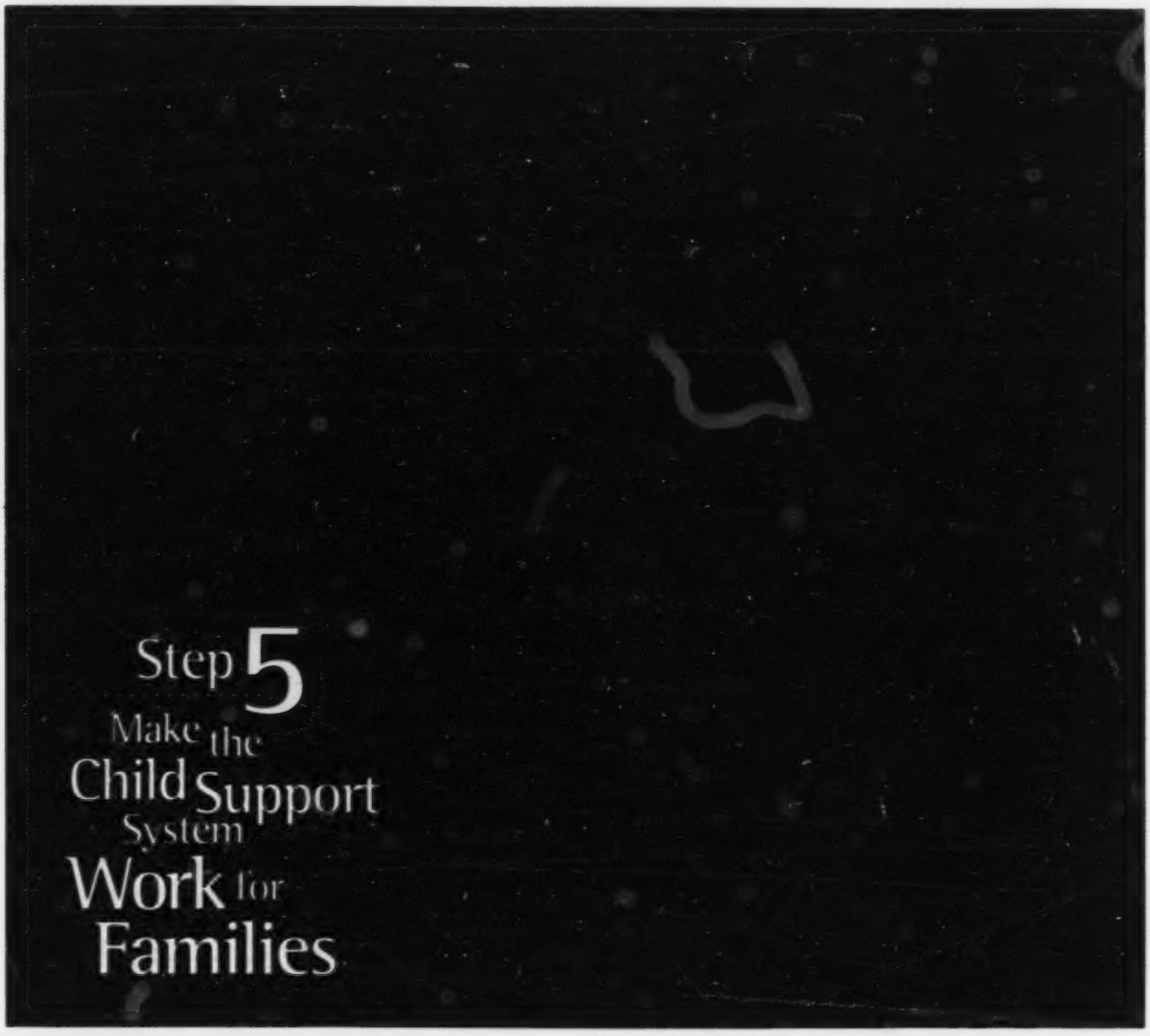
For Further Reading

Broke but Not Deadbeat: Reconnecting Low-Income Fathers and Children, by Dana Reichert. National Conference of State Legislatures, July 1999. The guide includes detailed advice on how states can use TANF for responsible fatherhood programs.

Responsible Fatherhood and Welfare: How States Can Use the New Law to Help Children, by Stanley Bernard. National Center for Children in Poverty, 1998. This publication offers a state-by-state comparison of how states are addressing the issue of responsible fatherhood. It also offers creative suggestions for states that want to use federal funds for fatherhood programs.



Step 5
Make the Child Support System Work for Families

Over the past few decades, with increases in divorce rates and out-of-wedlock births, the number of children living in single-parent families has risen dramatically, to about 22 million.[22] Women head the overwhelming majority of these families. And almost half of these families have no child support order in place, which means that the non-custodial parent has no legal obligation to support the child.

Without financial support from both parents, children are much more likely to grow up in poverty, and their mothers are much more likely to need welfare. The poverty rate for children in two-parent families is 8.4 percent, but for children in divorced families, it's 31.3 percent, and for children whose parents never married, it's 64.1 percent.[23]

That is why Congress, in the 1990s, repeatedly strengthened child support laws, streamlined collection procedures, and instituted tough new penalties for fathers who don't pay. The states quickly followed suit: In the 1999 edition of *Map and Track*, 43 states reported that child support enforcement was their main programmatic tool for promoting responsible fatherhood.[24]

To an extent, tougher laws are working: Child support collections have increased 80 percent from 1993 to 1997. But the number of parents from whom child support is being collected has risen much more slowly. In 1993, 18.3 percent of parents on the federal child support rolls were paying; in 1997, that figure had risen to 22 percent.[25]

Obviously, some of these children's fathers are "deadbeat." Others refuse to pay child support because they claim mothers deny them access to their children. Indeed, in 25 to 40 percent of divorced families, fathers who are legally entitled to see their children are completely or sporadically denied access by the mothers.[26] The percentage among never-married fathers – who generally don't have custody agreements – is likely to be even higher.

Fathers' Access to Their Children Is a Critical Issue

By enhancing access and visitation programs and by educating fathers about their rights, states can go a long way toward addressing fathers' concerns and exposing fathers who are using visitation as an excuse not to pay support. The federal welfare reform law of 1996 provided $10 million in "access and visitation" block grants to states for programs to make it easier for non-custodial parents to see their children.

A few states have begun to experiment with making visitation easier for fathers. In Utah and Idaho, mothers who deny fathers visitation can lose their driver's licenses. And at the local level, the Santa Clara County, California, district attorney has considered creating a separate unit to enforce visitation.

How Poor Fathers Fall Behind

Even with extensive access and visitation services, some fathers won't pay child support – not because they are "deadbeat," but because they are "dead broke." For many low-income fathers, child support awards are simply too high to pay.

Only 17 percent of low-income non-custodial fathers paid child support in 1990. But those who did paid an average of $1,854, or about 50 percent of their annual income.[27]

Under these circumstances, it's not surprising that many low-income fathers accumulate child support debt. In the Parents' Fair Share program for low-income unmarried fathers, the average participant owed $2,755. Seventeen percent of fathers owed $8,000 or more. Realistically, some low-income fathers will never be able to pay these debts.[28]

Don, who lives in Los Angeles, provides a typical example. The divorced father of one daughter, he had little trouble paying child support until he lost his job when arthritis made it impossible for him to work. He ended up on disability; his daughter ended up on welfare; and his child support debt grew quickly. Today, even though he is working again, he owes so much that he can't even keep up with the interest. Of his $32,000 in debt, $16,000 is interest. "I've been paying child support every month," says Don, "and I'm $4,000 deeper in the hole than I was two years ago."

If Don owed that $32,000 directly to his daughter, federal law would require him to make payments to her mother. But Don's daughter is on welfare. And in most states, the largest portion of child support payments for welfare families is used to repay the state and federal governments for their TANF expenses. Child support experts call this "state debt." All $32,000 of Don's debt is state debt; even if he manages to pay it off, his daughter will not benefit.

Using the Child Support Pass-through

Before 1996, federal law required states to pass through $50 of the child support they collected on behalf of welfare families directly to those families. This created at least some incentive for non-custodial parents to cooperate with the system. But federal welfare reform eliminated the pass-through requirement, and ended federal funding for the program. Since that time, 31 states have abolished their pass-throughs.

The bottom line: When the money goes to the state, not their children, and when the debts become so large that they have no realistic expectation of being able to pay, low-income fathers have little incentive to pay child support.

Pass-throughs and Easing the Burden of Debt

States can act now to remove these disincentives. As Vicki Turetsky of the Center for Law and Social Policy points out, states have discretion under current law to pass through more support to families. They also have discretion to suspend, reduce, or forgive any child support debts that are owed to the state, not the family. For instance, TANF-related child support debts could be waived for fathers who participate in employment and fatherhood programs and subsequently maintain up-to-date child support payments.

This would dramatically lower arrearages for many fathers. For example, Washington state forgives the state debt of non-custodial parents who marry or reunite and prove financial hardship. Vermont suspends payments on child support debt when parents reunite and have combined incomes of below 225 percent of the federal poverty level.

State debt forgiveness would give fathers who cooperate with fatherhood programs and begin paying child support on a regular basis an opportunity to start anew. Fathers would still owe families any arrears that accumulate before or after the family leaves TANF.

Elaine Sorensen of the Urban Institute suggests that states also guarantee "self-support reserves" for low-income fathers. Already in effect in many states, this provision allows non-custodial parents to keep a portion of their income to live on, regardless of their child support obligations. This minimum standard protects low-income working fathers from overwhelming child support demands.

Taking Advantage of the Earned Income Tax Credit

Finally, states can use their tax codes to increase earnings for low-income fathers who are working, but who aren't earning enough to support themselves and their children. The federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) provides a refundable credit to working families with annual incomes of $26,928 for one child or $30,580 for two or more children. In early 2000, 10 states had adopted their own versions of the Earned Income Tax Credit, and more were considering the idea.

In general, federal EITC benefits – and most state EITC benefits – accrue to the custodial parent only. Non-custodial parents don't get credit for paying child support. This means that low-income non-custodial parents must have earnings 50 to 100 percent higher than custodial parents in order to pay child support and taxes and enjoy the same standard of living as the custodial family.

Elaine Sorensen and Laura Wheaton of the Urban Institute offer three suggestions for expanding tax benefits for low-income fathers who pay child support. First, states could allow non-custodial parents who meet their support obligations and the EITC income criteria to claim the same EITC benefit claimed by families with children. In effect, both mothers and fathers would be considered "custodial parents." The credit would be capped at the amount of support paid.

Second, states could give custodial parents priority for the EITC. If custodial parents were ineligible because of their high income, however, non-custodial parents could claim the EITC by meeting their support obligations and the income criteria.

Finally, states could opt to give non-custodial parents who pay child support half of the tax credit amount they would receive if the child lived with them, or the amount of child support paid, whichever is lower. Because fathers would be required to pay child support in full to qualify for the EITC, all of these policy options would provide incentives for fathers to pay support. The proposals also would increase the take-home earnings of fathers.

Recommendations

❑ **Governors and legislators should reinstate their state's child support pass-throughs or strengthen existing pass-throughs to allow at least some of the child support paid by low-income fathers to be paid directly to their families.**

❑ Governors and legislators should forgive or decrease TANF-related child support debt for fathers who participate in programs designed to increase their earnings and improve their parenting skills.

❑ Governors and legislators should dedicate revenues from TANF-related child support collections to fund responsible fatherhood programs.

❑ Governors and legislators should rewrite state child support guidelines to allow self-support reserves for non-custodial working parents.

❑ Governors and legislators should amend their state Earned Income Tax Credits to give fathers credit for the child support they pay.

❑ In every notice they mail out, child support enforcement offices should include a telephone number fathers can call if they want to contest paternity, seek modification of a child support order, or negotiate custody and visitation issues.

❑ Governors and legislators should suspend or forgive child support debt owned to the state when parents reunite or marry.

Examples from the Front Lines

Wisconsin

When Governor Tommy Thompson proposed the landmark W-2 welfare replacement program in 1995, he made a simple argument: Families should not receive public benefits without being obliged to work, but, once working, they should not suffer penalties not faced by other working families. One of these penalties, as Thompson saw it, was being forced to assign their child support rights to the state. He proposed that Wisconsin W-2 families be allowed to keep all of the child support collected on their behalf. Then he went a step further, proposing that any child support families received be disregarded when the state calculates eligibility for W-2.

The legislature enacted the 100 percent pass-through in 1995. In March 1996, the federal government granted Wisconsin a waiver, agreeing to share the expenses of the pass-through. Although the 1996 federal welfare reform abolished federal funding for the pass-through, it preserved all waivers; thus federal funding for Wisconsin's program has continued.

Only two other states – Connecticut and Vermont – have tried the 100 percent pass-through, and Wisconsin is the only state that disregards all child support paid to the family when calculating W-2 eligibility. But these policies hold promise. According to a preliminary evaluation by the University of Wisconsin, parents receiving the full pass-through are leaving welfare more quickly than those in a control group who received only a $50 per month pass-through.

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Georgia

With the help of a TANF access and visitation grant, the child support enforcement agency launched an access and visitation program in two counties. The program provides case assessment, co-parenting education, monitored visitation, and neutral pick-up and drop-off sites. The program has been so successful that in early 2000, the state planned to implement it in every county.

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New York

When the state adopted its child support collection guidelines in 1989, the legislature included an important feature for non-custodial parents: a self-support reserve. In cases in which fathers don't earn enough to support themselves, judges may reduce child support orders to as little as $25 per month. In addition to the self-support reserve, the state caps child support debt for low-income non-custodial parents at $500.

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Other Resources

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For Further Reading

Map and Track: State Initiatives to Encourage Responsible Fatherhood, by Stanley N. Bernard and Jane Knitzer. National Center for Children in Poverty, 1999. This informative book provides brief rundowns of every state's responsible fatherhood efforts, including innovative, father-friendly approaches to child support enforcement.

Obligating Dads: Helping Low-Income Noncustodial Fathers Do More for Their Children, by Elaine Sorensen. The Urban Institute, 1999. Sorenson's paper is one of the best explanations of how the states can make child support policies more father-friendly.

Noncustodial Parents, Child Support, and the Earned Income Tax Credit, by Laura Wheaton and Elaine Sorensen. The Urban Institute, November 28, 1997. The paper discusses in detail proposed changes to the federal Earned Income Tax Credit – changes that easily can be adapted by states.

Setting Support When the Noncustodial Parent is Low Income, by Paula Roberts. Center for Law and Social Policy, February 8, 1999. Roberts' short paper offers practical advice on how states and courts should determine child support.

STRUGGLING TO STAY ON TRACK: ONE FATHER'S STORY

Albert, a man in his early 30s who lives in Los Angeles, freely admits he has made some serious mistakes in his life. At 13, his father threw him out of the family home and he spent his teen years living with a series of friends and relatives. He joined a gang and never finished high school; he was convicted of assault in 1998 and served 15 months in prison.

But one thing Albert doesn't regret is fathering his daughter, who now is age six. Although he never married her mother, he sees his little girl once or twice each week. He longs to spend more time with her. "I missed so much time with her when I was in prison," he says.

While in prison, Albert missed something else: a court summons, which was delivered to his parents' home and remained unopened until his release. Because his daughter's mother had gone on welfare, the district attorney sought to recover the state's TANF costs by obtaining a support order. Albert didn't find out about the order until his parole, when he opened 15 months of old mail and discovered that he was $6,000 in debt.

To Albert, that debt seemed insurmountable. While he had earned a GED in prison, his felony conviction made it difficult for him to find a job. And because of unpaid child support, he lost his driver's license, making it almost impossible to get to work in Los Angeles, a city notorious for its lack of public transportation.

When he got a letter from the district attorney's office inviting him to a presentation about the CSS Parents' Fair Share Program, Albert was suspicious that it was a sting operation, and that he would end up in jail for unpaid child support. Instead, staff from the Los Angeles County Department of Community and Senior Services told him that they could offer job-search and placement assistance, as well as a 12-week peer support group. In exchange for participating, Albert would get his driver's license back. PFS staff members also promised to try to help him get his child support order modified.

Albert has nothing but praise for the support group, which met 18 times and loosely followed a responsible fatherhood curriculum designed by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation. He says that the group helped him open up and "be human again" after his time in prison. "It's helpful in the sense that some things that are bothering me, I can get out," he says, "When I had problems, I didn't have anyone to talk to. I don't really have a lot of friends." The men in the group – most of whom had served time in prison – provided a safe space in which he could discuss topics like sex, parenting, employment, or even the latest movies.

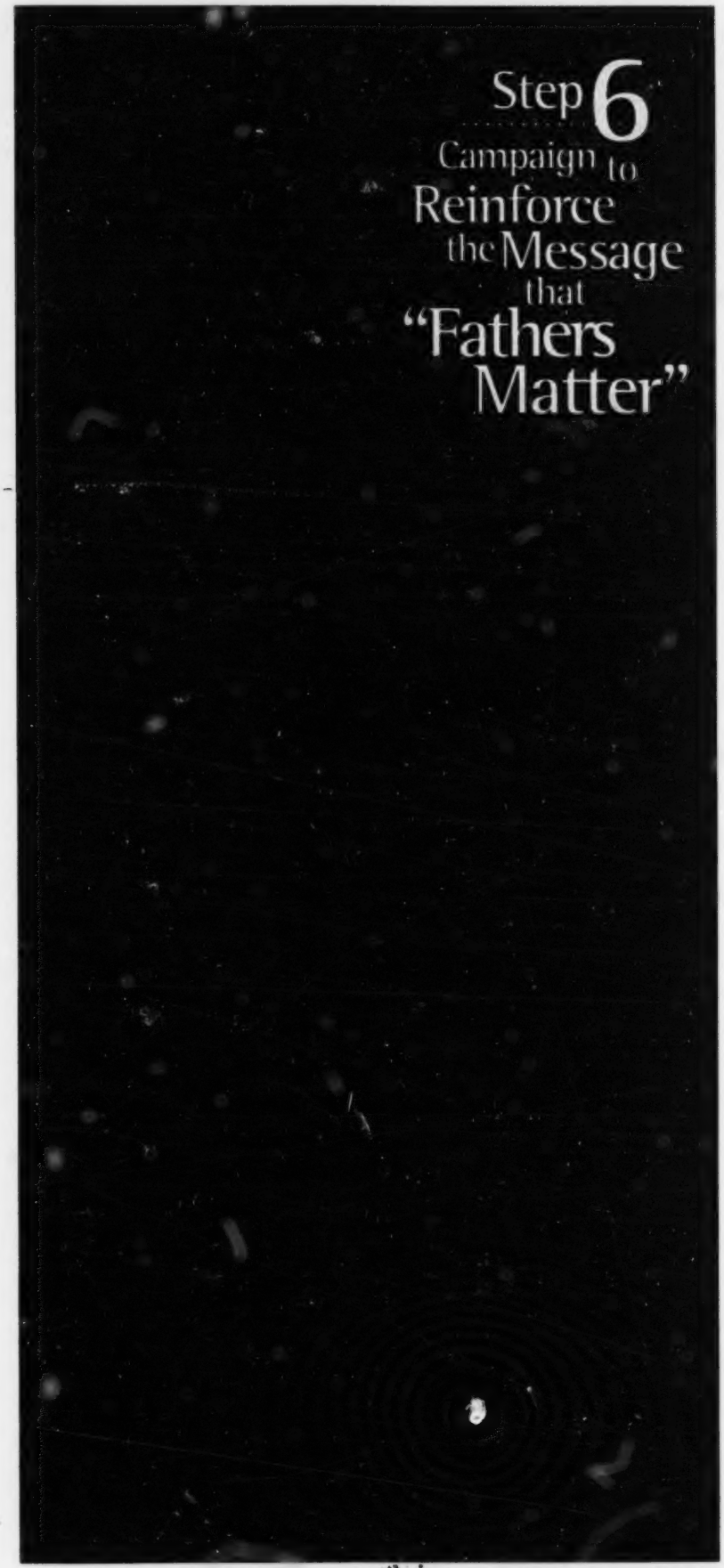
The peer group also gave Albert new insights about his relationships with his daughter and her mother. While he hopes to someday gain custody of his child, for now he is learning to be more effective at team parenting with his daughter's mother.

Albert is less pleased with the employment component of the program. "They didn't do a lot of things they said they'd do," he says. "We were supposed to have mock interviews, and we never did that. They sent me to an agency...but I didn't get anything through that." Finally Albert found a job on his own. Without CSS Parents' Fair Share, however, he might not have been able to take that job. The program kept its promise to get his driver's license reinstated and CSS Parents' Fair Share is paying for the tools he needs to do his job.

Despite the progress he has made in both his relationships and employment, Albert still faces some problems. Chief among these is his child support debt, which has ballooned to more than $12,000. Interest continues to accrue, even as Albert struggles to pay his $211 monthly child support payments out of monthly take-home pay of $700. He lives with relatives to save money and borrowed money from them to buy a car for work.

Accompanied by his daughter's mother and an advocate from the district attorney's office, Albert went to court recently to seek forgiveness or reduction of his TANF-related debt. The court turned him down, and it angers Albert that he must pay $12,000 to the state and his daughter will not see a penny of the money. He continues to make monthly payments, hoping that he will find a better job.

In the meantime, he struggles to provide the basics for his little girl, who recently celebrated a birthday. "I went and borrowed some money from a friend and bought her an outfit," he says. "I was thinking about a toy, but I know she needs clothes."



Step 6 Campaign to Reinforce the Message that "Fathers Matter"

Public awareness campaigns – reinforcing the message that children need their fathers for financial as well as emotional support – can play a major role in changing society's attitudes toward fatherhood. Even more importantly, these efforts can change the attitudes of fathers themselves.

The National Fatherhood Initiative, a non-profit that works to promote fathers' involvement with their children, has developed a wide variety of materials that states and communities can use or tailor to their specific needs. So far, radio and television ads designed by NFI and featuring celebrities such as James Earl Jones, Alec Baldwin, Tiger Woods, and Tom Selleck have garnered $120 million in donated airtime.

NFI encourages states to develop campaigns of their own or with NFI, as Texas and Pennsylvania have done. Arizona worked with the Cardinals football team on a billboard campaign, "Fatherhood Can Be Child's Play." Team members are featured with their children on billboards in Arizona cities. Colorado, Indiana, Louisiana and Maine also work with local sports teams to get the word out on fatherhood. Other campaigns use actors or musicians.

Building Grassroots Support

NFI also has helped more than 150 community forums to mobilize local leaders to do what they can do to promote responsible fatherhood and works with a number of states to build grassroots support for the idea. In 2000, NFI received a grant from the state of Texas to launch NFI's first fully staffed office in that state. The Texas Fatherhood Initiative will help advocates and communities build a public awareness campaign, hold fatherhood forums, offer a fatherhood resource center, and teach communities how to evaluate outcomes of fatherhood programs.

The Kansas City-based National Center for Fathering is another key organization working in communities. The center's goal is countering negative stereotypes about fathers. Says its director, Dr. Ken Canfield, "We need to change mindsets so that the public understands that fathers have something to offer children beyond what mothers offer – that the influence of two parents

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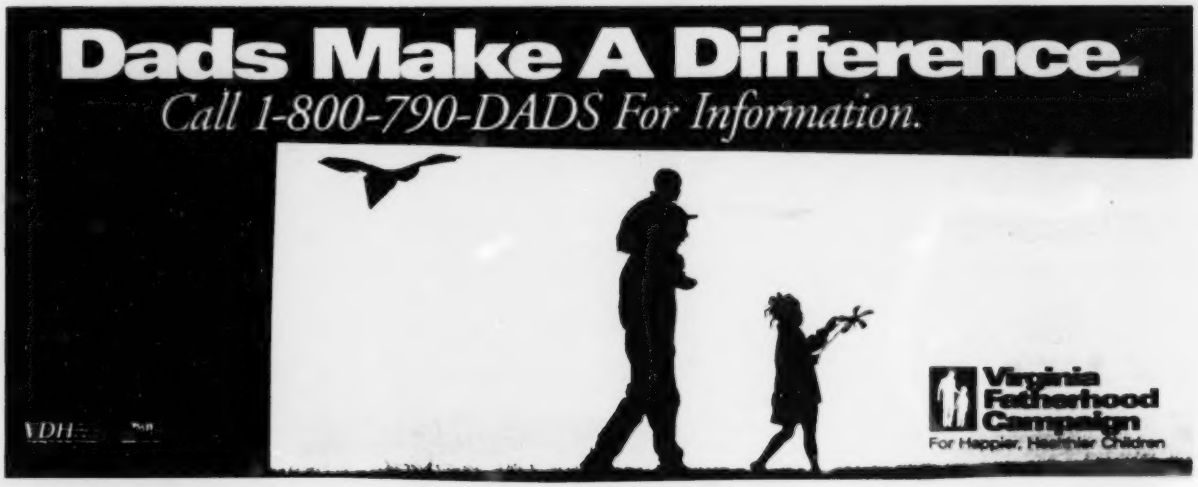

is good for children." In addition to crafting a message that fathers are important to children, Canfield's organization offers states, communities, and individual fathers specific ideas about what they can do to act on that notion.

The National Center reports that it has 170,000 members, mostly fathers, many of whom found their way to the center through its website, www.fathers.com. The center offers a variety of seminars and small group materials designed to help men become competent and comfortable in their roles as fathers. The center's products are tailored to specific audiences, including businesses, civic groups, social service organizations, hospitals, schools, and faith communities.

What About Poor Unwed Fathers?

An even greater challenge than raising awareness that fathers matter is the challenge of convincing the public – and fathers themselves – that low-income non-custodial fathers are capable of being good parents.

Improving the circumstances of low-income fathers and families will require a major shift in attitudes, both by the general public and the professionals who work with low-income families. That won't be easy. *The New York Times* once described these men as "the kind of men who gather on street corners with half-smoked cigarettes behind their ears."[7]

In some cases, there is truth to the stereotype. But that does not mean that these fathers are beyond help. Indeed, Mark Peter Lundquist of the faith-based Center for Fathering in Minneapolis speaks eloquently of "father hunger" among the men that he sees. "The only guys we can't help are the guys who don't want help," he says.

Listening to Fathers

One way to break the stereotype is to listen to fathers themselves. The National Practitioners' Network for Fathers and Families estimates that nearly 1,000 programs nationwide work with fathers, but most are small and unknown. Taking the time to learn what already exists in the community – visiting programs, talking to fathers, inviting them to speak at community forums – can give policymakers a good idea of where the service gaps are in their own communities, and what barriers local fathers in their communities face.

Next, policymakers can look inwards. When the child support enforcement office in Hennepin County, Minnesota, helped to found the FATHER Project, Lynne Auten says that her own staff had a lot of learning to do. "This is the first time the child support enforcement office has had an initiative in place to provide services like this," Auten says. "The child support system is set up to deal with people unwilling to pay. You don't consider, 'They can't.' It's also a shift for our TANF staff. Our TANF caseworkers are not used to thinking of absent fathers as resources to their families."

To help foster change, Auten has assigned trained staff to handle cases where the father is a participant in the FATHER Project. She has also added a module about fragile families to the training curriculum for new child support caseworkers. The module includes information about low-income fathers, the barriers they face, and what community resources are available.

Some agencies have taken the issue a step further, making the commitment to start thinking of fathers as an integral part of the family on all issues pertaining to children – and to making sure that their own policies are father-friendly. From requiring TANF caseworkers to provide outreach to fathers, to encouraging fathers to volunteer in Head Start classrooms, policymakers can do many things to make fathers feel more connected to their families.

Recommendations

- ❑ Governors should appoint Fatherhood Commissions to advise policymakers on how state agencies can better serve fathers and families.
- ❑ Governors and legislators should initiate and fund public awareness campaigns that promote responsible fatherhood.
- ❑ Governors and legislators should provide funding and technical assistance to community-based organizations that develop father resource centers to serve as local clearinghouses for training and advice to fathers and social service agencies.
- ❑ All state agencies should conduct agency audits for father-friendliness to assess how they can expand and improve services to fathers and to determine whether they can eliminate bureaucratic

barriers that discourage men from supporting their children.

❑ All state agencies should include a fathers' component in any diversity training that their employees are required to attend.

❑ Governors, legislators, and agency officials should all visit a few fatherhood programs. Elected officials also should convene fatherhood hearings or town hall meetings and invite low-income non-custodial fathers to speak.

Examples from the Front Lines

Virginia

When the Virginia Fatherhood Campaign (VFC) wanted to market "being a good Dad" messages to the public, it asked focus groups of low-income men to react to the materials, some of which included pictures of celebrities and their children. When the fathers said they preferred to see ordinary fathers, VFC redesigned its public service announcements, eschewing celebrity endorsements, and targeted them to places that young men frequent, including sporting events and barber shops.

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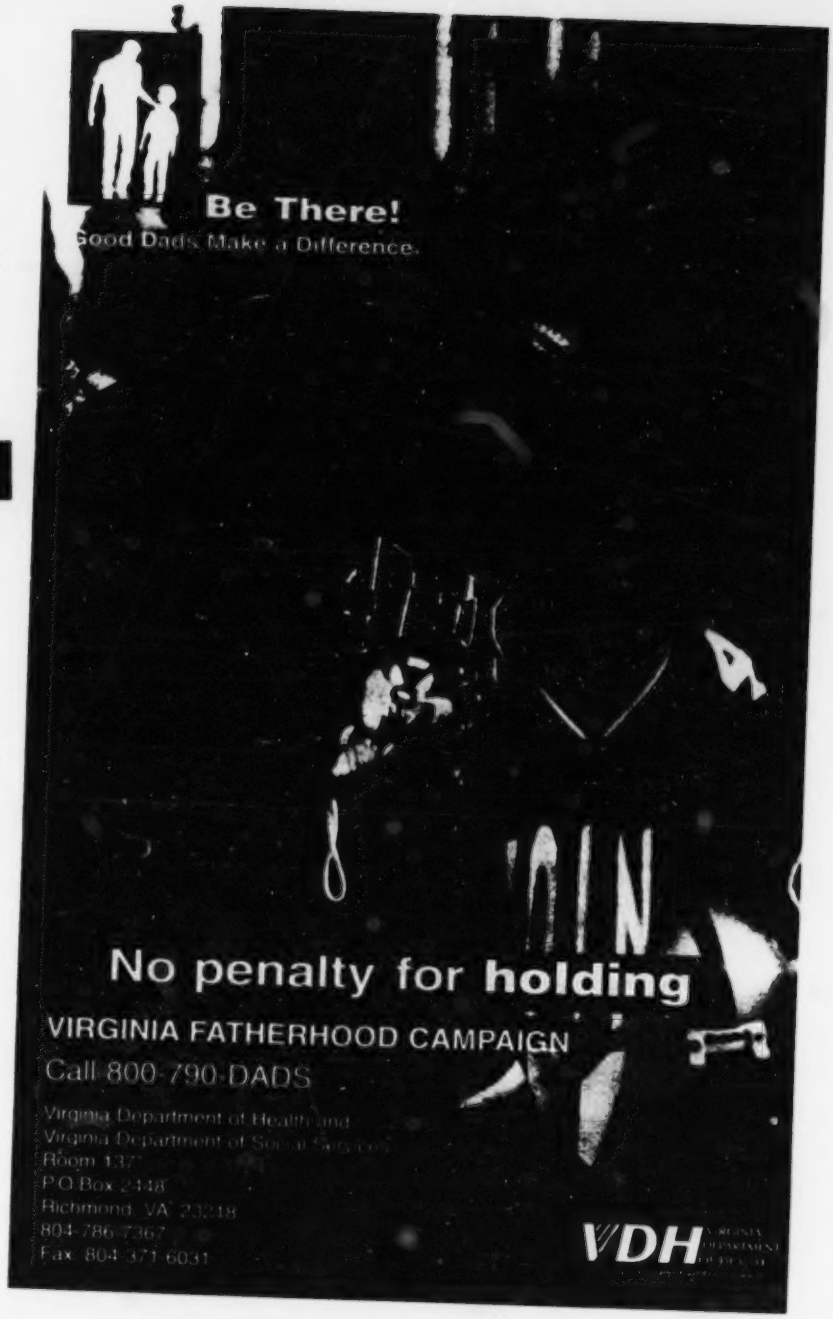

Illinois

The Illinois Father Initiative is a statewide, volunteer-led non-profit that promotes public-private partnerships to connect children and fathers and equips men to become better fathers and father figures. With help from the National Center for Fathering, IFI sponsors an annual fatherhood essay contest; so far 140,000 students in the grades 1-12 have participated. IFI has published the winning essays, as well as a resource guide for fathers and a "Faces of Fatherhood" calendar that sold 90,000 copies.

The organization also partners with the Illinois Department of Human Resources to offer Boot Camp for New Dads programs in 24 hospitals across the state and has begun work on an evaluation tool employers can use to determine whether their workplaces are father-friendly.

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Wisconsin

When he launched the Wisconsin Fatherhood Initiative in 1998 with help from NFI, Governor Tommy Thompson issued an executive order requiring all state agencies to review their policies and make them more father-friendly. For example, the Department of Transportation helped fathers who lost their driver's licenses for not paying child support get their licenses back so they could return to work.

(continued on page 39)

DOING THINGS RIGHT: THE VIRGINIA FATHERHOOD CAMPAIGN

Virginia Department of Health

In 1994 George Allen, then governor of Virginia, put together an advisory group of community leaders to help reduce welfare dependency in Virginia. The group determined that the best way to reduce welfare dependency was to find strategies to restore fathers to families. Whether fathers abandoned families or never connected with them in the first place, father absence caused many families to become dependent on public assistance.

That finding led to one of the first statewide responsible fatherhood efforts, the Virginia Fatherhood Campaign, which was launched with the support of the National Fatherhood Initiative. Ron J. Clark, the former national program consultant and social worker who directs the initiative, says its goal is to get more fathers to invest in their children by spending both time *and* money on them. The campaign targets all fathers, but its particular emphasis is on low-income, non-custodial fathers.

The VFC is housed within the state health department and has an annual budget of about $500,000; the money comes from a variety of sources, including child support enforcement funds through the state Department of Social Services and the federal Maternal and Child Health block grant. VFC makes the most of this limited budget.

Its first effort was a public awareness campaign launched with help from the National Fatherhood Initiative. The state solicited free airtime from radio and television stations and put up billboards along major highways. The message was simple: All fathers should spend time with their kids. Says Clark, "The NFI ads tap into the basic instinct and needs that fathers have for kids." The ads caught the public's attention; a University of Virginia study found that 37 percent of Virginians recalled seeing the NFI ads. The survey also found that, as a result of the campaign's impact, more men were actually spending time with their children.

As the VFC's public awareness efforts continue, says Clark, the campaign has refined its approach. VFC now shies away from celebrity endorsements, preferring instead to use photos and quotes from ordinary fathers. "We've made a radical change in our brochures," Clark says. "That's something we're proud of – we're a campaign that's community-friendly. The mistake people make sometimes is that they produce messages that appeal to people like themselves, not to the communities they are targeting."

VFC also tailors its father-involvement message to specific groups. A Spanish-language brochure, for example, features only pictures of Latino families. And Clark has initiated a "barbershop campaign," securing agreements with 75 barbershops to display VFC materials.

In the early days of the commonwealth's effort, NFI also helped train social service providers and community-based organizations that dealt with fathers and helped the state put on a series of fatherhood forums. These days, Clark makes dozens of presentations to religious congregations, military personnel, and non-profits. He then trains these groups to create, run, and evaluate local responsible fatherhood programs.

Jon Morris, who runs the ROAD (Reaching Out to Adolescent Dads) program in Roanoke, says that Clark's presentations have definitely made a difference. "There are fatherhood programs sprouting up where people wouldn't have even thought about it."

To encourage new initiatives, VFC awards more than $200,000 in seed grants to community-based fatherhood programs each year. The grants are small, no more than $25,000, but they've helped more than 80 programs across the state get started. According to Clark, about 60 of these programs are still operating.

One success story is the South Hampton Roads Fatherhood Program, which serves Norfolk and Viriginia Beach. A coalition of family services organizations started the program in 1997 when its members realized that most local family services were targeted towards mothers. "You can't have a healthy family and not include fathers," says Maryellen Browne, who coordinates the fatherhood program as part of her work at Family Services of Tidewater, Inc.

The program has served more than 60 men, offering classes and advice on child development, family planning, the child support system, and anger management. Browne says the program works with both fathers and mothers to build healthier relationships. "Most of our families aren't married," she notes, "and if you don't get Mom on the same page, it doesn't matter how good your fatherhood program is, because she won't let him see the kids."

Browne's program doesn't provide job training and placement services; instead it refers fathers to those programs. This is typical of VFC-funded efforts. Clark says, "It is important not to try to be all things to all people. Partnerships are very important."

The campaign also emphasizes abstinence until marriage. VFC's message to young men is, "'Wait to have children until you are married and capable of supporting yourselves,'" says Clark, "and we focus primarily on abstinence – self control, not birth control." VFC succeeded in getting a fatherhood unit included in Virginia's family life curriculum, which is distributed for optional use by the state's public schools.

Five years after its inception, VFC is expanding its focus. Clark is developing a brochure for incarcerated

fathers with tips on how they can stay involved with their children. He has been appointed to the state's child support guidelines review panel and to the governor's task force on youth violence. VFC has provided advice and assistance to over 20 states that are considering their own fatherhood initiatives. And Clark hopes for more funding that will enable him to evaluate the programs that VFC has funded.

But Clark is adamant that VFC's core role will remain unchanged: It will be a small, strategic office that leverages state resources for the benefit of community groups working with fathers. "Our goal is to empower community organizations," he says. "Not to have a lot of employees and not do much in the communities where fathers and families live."

(continued from page 37)

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Florida

The Florida Commission on Responsible Fatherhood, created by the legislature in 1996 and funded by the state, has 25 members, including representatives from non-profits, hospitals, business, the judiciary, members of the legislature, and gubernatorial appointees. The commission, with a full-time staff of three, receives its operating budget from the legislature and raises additional funds so that it can make small grants (maximum $50,000) to fatherhood programs around the state. In addition, the commission holds public meetings, recommends legislation, conducts media campaigns, and sponsors a statewide father conference.

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Other Resources

National Fatherhood Initiative

NFI is dedicated to improving the well-being of children by increasing the number of children growing up with involved, committed, and responsible fathers in their lives. NFI conducts public awareness campaigns promoting responsible fatherhood, helps agencies conduct audits to determine whether they are father-friendly, organizes national and local conferences and community fatherhood forums, provides resource materials to organizations seeking to establish support programs for fathers, conducts research on fatherhood, promotes public policy to encourage responsible fatherhood, and disseminates information to men seeking to become better fathers.

The organization also has established bi-partisan governors' and mayors' committees on responsible fatherhood. As of 2000, the governors' commission had 18 members and more than 50 mayors had joined the mayors' commission.

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The National Center for Fathering

The National Center for Fathering airs a nationwide radio program on fathering and offers a wide variety of live seminars and small group materials designed to help men improve their parenting skills. These are all tailored to specific audiences, including businesses, civic groups, social service organizations, hospitals, schools, and faith communities. Through its Life Course of Fathering curricula, the National Center provides resources for new fathers, fathers of pre-school and school-age children, fathers of teens, empty-nesters, and grandfathers.

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National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families

NPNFF is the national membership organization for people and programs that are working to increase the responsible involvement of fathers in the lives of their children. NPNFF offers publications, conferences, training events, technical assistance, and advocacy on behalf of fathers and fragile families. It also maintains a list of fatherhood programs nationwide.

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National Center on Fathers and Families

NCOFF, one of the nation's pre-eminent research centers on fatherhood, runs a state policy series that brings together state legislators, agency officials, non-profits, and academics. At these meetings, participants exchange information about efforts and initiatives within their states, learn from each other, and create better linkages between child support activities and father involvement efforts.

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Kathleen Sylvester founded SPAN in 1997 and serves as its director. Previously, she was vice president for domestic policy of the Progressive Policy Institute, where she directed the Institute's work on family policy, education, and governance.

She began her professional career teaching in the inner city of New Haven, Connecticut. Sylvester spent the next two decades as an award-winning journalist, reporting and editing for a variety of news organizations including *Governing* magazine, NBC News, National Public Radio, *The Washington Star*, and the Associated Press.

Sylvester served as a consultant to Vice President Gore's National Performance Review and advises federal, state, and local officials on domestic social issues. She has written numerous articles and papers on topics including teenage pregnancy, welfare reform, education, and reinventing government.

She earned an undergraduate degree from the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service and a master's degree from Wesleyan University. She also studied at the Yale Law School and spent a year at Stanford University as the recipient of a John S. Knight Fellowship.

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She is the author of *Improving Outcomes for Mother and Child: A Review of the Massachusetts Teen Living Program* (1996), which won prizes at the Kennedy School for best master's thesis and best work in the field of poverty policy. Most recently, she was co-author (with Anthony P. Carnevale) of *A Piece of the Puzzle: How States Can Use Education to Make Work Pay for Welfare Recipients* (2000), and co-author (with Lisa M. Kelly) of *A Place to Call Home: Second Chance Homes in Georgia* (2000).

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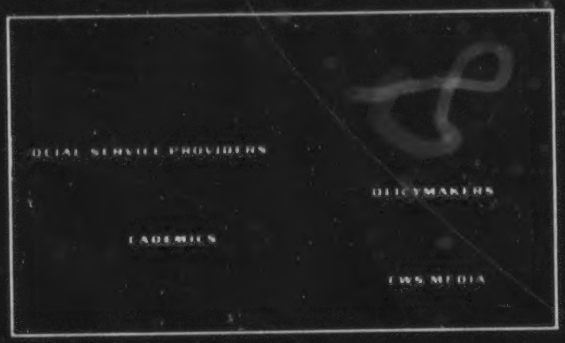
SPAN



SOCIAL POLICY ACTION NETWORK

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